

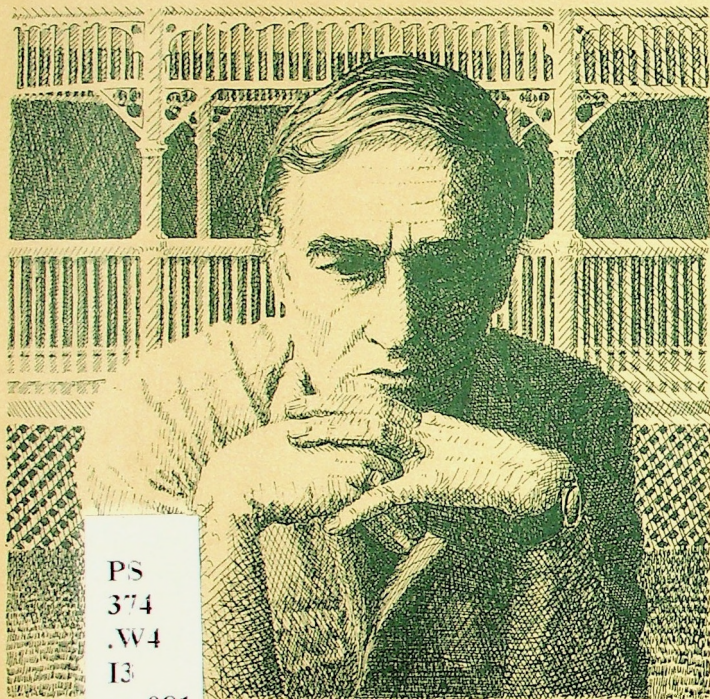
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WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

No. 81

LANFORD WILSON

by Mark Busby



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Boise State University Western Writers Series Number 81

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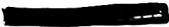
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Lanford Wilson

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Lanford Wilson

Vincent, the main character in Lanford Wilson's first Broadway play, *The Gingham Dog*, explains that he left his small Kentucky town for New York because he was "sick of small people—ambitions—hopes—small hopelessness," and he thought that New Yorkers "could comprehend something outside themselves, respond." It was perhaps a similar attraction that brought Lanford Wilson from a small farm near Ozark, Missouri, to the bright lights of the Great White Way, but just as Vincent eventually discovers, Wilson learned that continuing connections with one's region remain. He also knows that coming home is not always wrapped in comfortable nostalgia. Nonetheless, some of Lanford Wilson's greatest successes as a playwright have come when he husbanded his Midwestern roots as the subjects for his plays.

Wilson was born to Ralph Eugene and Violette Careybell (Tate) Wilson on 13 April 1937 in Lebanon, Missouri, a small town in south central Missouri at the edge of the Mark Twain National Forest. When he was five, his parents divorced, and he and his mother moved to Springfield, where she got a job in a garment factory. When Lanford was fourteen, his mother married a dairy inspector with two daughters, and the family moved to a farm near Ozark, a small town of about 1,500 in south central Missouri.

Wilson first became attracted to theater while watching a touring company presentation of *Brigadoon*: "After that town came back to life on stage, movies didn't stand a chance." A short time later

he saw a production of *Death of a Salesman* at Southwest Missouri State College in Springfield, and his interest in theater increased. At Ozark High School, where he also ran track, Wilson played Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, his introduction to Tennessee Williams, whose writing significantly influenced Wilson's.

In 1955-56 Wilson attended Southwest Missouri State where he studied art history. The experience was a lasting one, for it drew Wilson to the past:

My subject in school was art history. And through that I learned what we have done, what our heritage was, and what we are doing to it. It's like America is trying to reverse the myth of Jupiter; instead of the old man eating his children, the children are eating their grandparents. (Haller 26)

Generational conflicts and concern with the past are two themes that often appear in Wilson's plays.

Wilson's first-hand experience with parental conflict resulted after he headed west to stay with his father, step-mother, and two half-brothers in California in 1956. It was an important time that became the basis for Wilson's autobiographical play, *Lemon Sky*. Although he worked briefly as a riveter at an aircraft plant with his father, Wilson explains what happened:

I went to live with my dad in San Diego for about a year. We didn't get along at all. He wanted me to come and work in a factory where he worked, but I just wasn't enthralled with the aircraft industry, any more than he was enthralled with the idea of my becoming a writer. (Flatley 1)

Even though his interests were divided between writing and art, Wilson took a writing course at San Diego State University with some friends and began writing short stories. However, he soon tired of the stress of living with his father and returned to the Midwest.

Wilson spent the next five years living and working in Chicago and for a time continued writing short stories and painting. He finally realized "that I wasn't the painter I thought I was" and turned to writing plays after he found writing dialogue appealing:

On my lunchtime I was writing stories. I tried dialogue, and before I'd gotten through the first page I knew I was a playwright. Probably I just couldn't get down what I say into a painting. It was too diverse, like four images at once. It was mud. I couldn't get that quadruple image in a painting, but it was very easy in a play. (Dace 3)

His formal training in playwriting was brief: "So I went to the University of Chicago adult education program, and in ten nights I learned about exposition and character development and all those things plays are made of. That was my playwriting education" (Shewey 18).

His experiences in Chicago, however, were also part of his education. The lesson came when he learned that several historic buildings were being demolished:

I got to Chicago just as they were tearing down every Frank Lloyd Wright building they could get their hands on. There would be a dozen ugly buildings in a row, and they would tear down the brilliant Frank Lloyd Wright building for a parking lot. (Haller 28)

In 1962 Wilson was armed with rejections for his short stories, and he had already concluded that he was no painter. Because his creativity had become directed toward writing plays, he decided to move to New York, thinking originally that Broadway was his goal. His initial experience was disheartening: "I came to New York with all that stardust in my eyes and saw every play on Broadway and hated everything" (Baker 41).

This disappointment was soon overcome after a chance meeting

with Joe Cino, who encouraged young artists by producing plays at his Caffè Cino. On the night that Wilson stopped in, Cino was presenting Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson*, and Wilson was overwhelmed: "I was bowled over by *The Lesson*. It was the first theatrical experience I had had in New York, and I had seen everything" (Baker 40). The exuberance of Off-Off-Broadway's experimental theater changed Wilson forever; before that experience Wilson had not known that "theater could be dangerous and funny in that way at the same time."

Wilson's first plays were written for the unusual theater at Caffè Cino, "[f]or that little confined space. It's why they're all so claustrophobic." Beyond influencing Wilson's concept of theatrical space, Caffè Cino inspired a strong sense of working with a company, a feeling he has regularly sought to maintain: "I think that everything that I have done since then has been a way to recreate that environment for myself—that family of workers."

This strong sense of work and belief in community were to become central to Wilson's writing. To support himself during this Off-Off-Broadway apprenticeship, Wilson worked odd jobs—furniture store clerk, waiter at a Cobbs Corner restaurant, and reservations clerk at the Hotel Americana. He told Don Shewey in *Rolling Stone* that he even resorted to hustling for a short time.

His diverse experiences helped Wilson achieve empathy with the offbeat characters who populate his early plays. In Wilson's seven-phase career, his Off-Off-Broadway plays for Joe Cino mark the first phase (1963-65), which includes most of the short, experimental plays done for Caffè Cino: *The Madness of Lady Bright*, *Home Free*, *Ludlow Fair*, *Days Ahead*, and two 1965 plays that are important to this study—*This Is the Rill Speaking*, set in an unidentified Midwestern town, and *The Sand Castle*, a California play.

The second phase (1965-72) includes Wilson's first full-length plays,

which were written for another Off-Off-Broadway stage, Ellen Stewart's Cafe La Mama: *Balm in Gilead* (1965), an urban play about New York's detritus, and *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1966), his first full-length Midwestern play. It won the 1966-67 Drama Desk Vernon Rice Award for contribution to Off-Broadway theater. Also included in this phase is *The Gingham Dog* (1968), which concerns the breakup of an interracial couple. Originally presented in Washington, D.C., this play marked Wilson's Broadway debut. Other full-length plays during this phase are *Lemon Sky* (1968), about Wilson's abortive reconciliation with his father in San Diego, and *Serenading Louie* (1970), Wilson's urban tragedy about the collapse of two marriages.

These last three plays opened to mixed reviews and caused the normally prolific Wilson to suffer his first writer's block. The lack of the theater family that was so important to his work at Caffe Cino also contributed to his difficulties. Therefore, in 1969 when Marshall Mason, Rob Thirkield, and Tanya Berezin began to discuss forming a company, Wilson readily joined them to establish the Circle Theatre Company, later the Circle Repertory Company.

The co-founding of the Circle Rep eventually led to the third phase of Wilson's career (1972-76), his first plays written for the Company. With the reestablished family feeling, Wilson began to write his most significant works, and he has been one of the key elements in the success of the Circle Repertory Company, where he has been the playwright-in-residence since the theater began. Mason, who until 1986 was the managing director of the Circle Rep, has directed most of Wilson's plays in one of the more creative collaborations in recent American theater. The combination of Mason's directing the plays Wilson writes has provided a way for a number of young actors to get started, as well. Among the former members of the Circle Rep who initially received recognition for their work

in Wilson's plays are Judd Hirsch, Jeff Daniels, and William Hurt.

Wilson's first plays for the Company were a one-act, *The Great Nebula in Orion*, and an improvisational "round," *The Family Continues*, both in 1972. The first major success there was *The Hot l Baltimore*, written with the aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1972 for a February 1973 premiere. Written especially for the Circle Repertory Company, the play was Wilson's first major success, winning the New York Drama Critics Circle and Obie awards for best play of the 1972-73 season. It was also instrumental in Wilson's receiving the Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award for most promising young playwright and a \$3,000 award from the American Academy of Letters. (During the 1975 television season a short-lived sitcom based on *Hot l* made \$25,000 for Wilson.)

The other plays during this period are *The Mound Builders* (1976), a full-length play that began leading Wilson back to his Midwestern background, and *Brontosaurus* (1977), a one-act play about a Manhattan antique dealer. Both *The Hot l Baltimore* and *The Mound Builders* demonstrate an ambivalence toward the past and are important forerunners to the fourth and perhaps major phase in Wilson's career (1977-81): his plays about the Talley family of Lebanon, Missouri.

The first play written, *5th of July*, is actually the last play chronologically, reminiscent of James Fenimore Cooper's pattern in the Leatherstocking series of moving from old age to youth. The play opened in April 1978 at the Circle Rep and later moved to Broadway and received a nomination for a Tony Award. The second play in the series, *Talley's Folly*, opened in 1979 and received the Pulitzer Prize for drama and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for 1980. The third play in the series has gone through several titles—from *War in Lebanon* (1980) to *A Tale Told* (1981) to *Talley & Son* (1985). Wilson once announced plans to write two

more plays in an eventual five-play cycle about the Talleys, but though he described the subjects of the next two plays (one to be about Whistler Talley, the other about the Talleys shortly after the Civil War), they remain unwritten. Although he still believes he may return to the Talleys, he has no immediate plans to continue the cycle (telephone interview 3 Nov. 1986).

The next phase in Wilson's career (1981-82) is marked by his moving away from the Talleys, first by returning to a California setting for a one-act play, *Thymus Vulgaris* (1981), followed in 1982 by *Angels Fall*, a full-length play set in a New Mexico mission. Not only do these two plays lead away from the Talleys, but the latter marks a departure for Wilson and establishes the fifth phase of his career, as he turned away from the Midwestern, California, and Eastern, urban settings to write about a specific area in which he had not lived.

From 1983 to 1985 Wilson experienced another brief creative slump, for instead of completing the Talley cycle, he returned to his earlier plays and revised and revived several of his older full-length plays: *Balm in Gilead*, *Serenading Louie*, *The Gingham Dog*, *Lemon Sky*, and *Talley & Son*. Most of these revivals were staged by the Circle Repertory Company, and Wilson updated the scripts to reflect the times. In some cases the plays were significantly revised, particularly the renamed *Talley & Son*. These revisions mark the sixth phase of Wilson's writing career and suggest that Lanford Wilson approached age fifty in another period of creative dormancy.

During this time he also completed a translation of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, commissioned for the Hartford Stage Company, and worked on a screenplay for *Talley's Folly*, written for Judd Hirsch, who starred in the role at the Circle Rep and on Broadway. Wilson describes writing the screenplay as being difficult, exciting, and "completely different" from writing for the stage because

the film dramatizes many of the actions that are explained by the characters in the play.

In a curious way, working on revisions of his older plays helped Wilson regain creativity. As he watched the revival of *Balm in Gilead*, he was pleased with the energy of the script, and he decided that he wished to restore some of that vitality to his work. Thus, when he started writing a new script, he wanted to remind himself that each page should be intense:

I always have the feeling that I'm not pushing myself far enough. And so at the top of all the pages I was writing "Burn This," just to remind myself that whatever was on that page should be a little more daring than what I had been doing. Just don't show this to anyone, like you would put at the bottom of a note.

As he continued working on the play and having members of the Circle Rep Company read the scenes that he had written, the actors convinced Wilson to use the words for the title. The fire imagery is appropriate, too, since the new play, *Burn This*, which opened in the spring of 1987 with John Malkovich, is an urban love story filled with tension. The production of *Burn This*, besides returning to an urban setting for Wilson, was the first time for Marshall Mason to direct a play at the Circle Repertory Theater since he resigned as managing director.

Through this varied career—from brief one-acts at Caffè Cino to full-length, award-winning plays on Broadway—Lanford Wilson has established himself as one of the major figures in contemporary American theater. Besides the Pulitzer Prize, he has received the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award, and three Tony nominations. Lance, as his friends call him, now lives alone in Sag Harbor, New York, in a three-story, five-bedroom, six-fireplace house built

in 1845. Tending his garden and restoring the house are two favorite pastimes, as life and work coalesce for the farmboy-become-playwright who often writes about tilling the Midwestern soil and preserving the past.

* * *

Lanford Wilson's imagination has been shaped by his Midwestern heritage. One interesting way he connects with other Western and Midwestern writers is in his use of a geographical continuum from the East through the Midwest to the West, a structure that has often given shape to American literature. Although Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis has been widely attacked by historians over the years, the frontier—what Turner called the “meeting point between savagery and civilization”—continues to be important to American writers as they draw from frontier imagery.

Many contemporary American writers express a deep ambivalence toward the frontier. On the one hand, they nod longingly toward some American frontier values (independence, endurance, initiative, strength, courage) and recognize positive traits associated with the pastoral or primitivist frontier. On the other hand, they acknowledge the limitations that a nostalgic frontier emphasis produces, and they recognize the problems spawned by playing what Larry McMurtry calls “symbolic frontiersman.”

For many older Midwestern and Western writers, civilization was generally associated with the East, the past, and with Europe—all of which were withering and moribund, especially the “dead hand” of the past. Civilization, then, was linked with society—its institutions, its laws, its demands for compromise and restriction, its cultural refinement and emphasis on manners, its industrial development, and its class distinctions.

The wilderness that civilization confronted represented many opposing ideas. Rather than the restrictive demands of society, the wilderness offered the possibility of individual freedom, where the single individual could test his or her sense of self against nature without the demand for social responsibility and the compromise of being part of a community. Cultural refinement and emphasis on manners gave way to pragmatic empiricism. Rather than industrialism, agrarianism was the major force. Class distinctions disappeared. In the wilderness breathed the all-enfolding spirit, a deity worshipped alike by Indians, Transcendentalists, and Naturalists.

For Wilson a dichotomy between the civilized but destructive East and the free but anarchic West appears in his plays set in various locations. During his varied career, Wilson has written California plays; many plays with Midwestern or rural settings; and a recent play with a New Mexico setting. A number of his Eastern, urban plays (*The Gingham Dog*, *Balm in Gilead*, *Brontosaurus*, *Serenading Louie*, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, *Burn This*) and experimental plays with no discernible settings (*The Family Continues*, *Days Ahead*, and others) fall outside the scope of this study. Yet, throughout many of these diverse plays, Wilson builds on the recognizable split between East and West.

Although the West, particularly California, is presented as the place where dreams lead and the individual can pursue all desires, it lacks a preserving sense of order and a necessary awareness of the past. The Midwest often suffers from the problems of both the East and the West. It can provide a withering emphasis on order, especially a puritanical repressiveness of the individual, without the cultural possibilities of the urban East. But the industrialism of the East denies the Midwest's and the West's connections to the beauty of the natural world.

Wilson, therefore, made uneasy by the unfettered world's lack

of shape and restriction and its emphasis on the isolated individual, looks to the border, the frontier between savagery and civilization, between shapelessness and restriction, as the place where the human being can flourish. He longs for a border, a newly regenerated Midwest severed from its deadening problems, unified by a community (or more likely a family), sustained by the tolerance, diversity, and cultural awareness of the East—without its attendant destructiveness—and the vitality of the West—without its instability and ahistoricism.

Many of Wilson's plays, therefore, endorse what Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* describes as the pastoral rather than the primitivist ideal. The primitivist ideal, often celebrated by Western writers, is as far from the restrictions of society as possible—deep in the territory ahead. But the pastoralist “seeks a resolution of the conflict between the opposed worlds of nature and art” (22). The savagery and wildness of the open landscape can be improved through human work and art or artifice. The pastoral ideal, thus, stresses the need for human community more than the primitivist, which emphasizes the unfettered individual.

Ultimately, Wilson's desire for a pastoral ideal shaped by human effort connects him with other Midwestern writers. When Midwesterner F. Scott Fitzgerald late in life wrote his daughter Scottie that “my generation of radicals and breakers-down never found anything to take the place of the old virtues of work and courage and the old graces of courtesy and politeness,” he expressed sentiments that some of Midwesterner Wilson's plays endorse, as well.

Of Wilson's themes affected by his Midwestern past Mel Gussow has noted:

His characters reach back to the past not for nostalgia but for anchors, for a lineage with those who have preceded them,

for sustaining values. In his art, there is a quest for durability, for attachment. Personal relationships are his religion—if only people would make contact. Even when his characters are immersed in an urban environment, they retain an incorruptible pioneer spirit. (32)

Several other primary themes besides this strong emphasis on the importance of place, the past, work, and family connect Wilson with other Midwestern and Western writers: an ambivalence toward his own rural background and the values associated with small-town American life; a related ambivalence toward Western values such as machismo and independence; a recurring interest in Indian lore; the use of unrealistic techniques or magical realism; a strong belief in the difficulty in but need for human communication; an abiding sense of humor.

In the introduction to *The Gingham Dog* published in 1970, in a passage tinged with the anger of the sixties, Wilson emphasized some of his continuing concerns:

We're raping our land. Ignoring (deeply, truly) the Indians, the black man, and each other. . . . Many people believe they are better than other people, *innately*; deserve to keep their wealth, or equal someone's possessions regardless of what it costs—what it costs *them*; their children; and the land. I mean the earth. Dirt. The very soil is dying. (x-xi)

The themes appear throughout Wilson's varied career, and some other generalizations are possible, as well. The typical Wilson play can perhaps be described as poetic naturalism: it revolves around characters whose language and memory cause them conflict with the reality of their circumstances. Many of his plays are crossroads drama because of Wilson's fondness for concentrating on moments when characters find themselves at significant points in their lives. Often the play's fulcrum is a past betrayal that must be confronted.

Usually Wilson leaves the characters before the circumstances are fully resolved, but there is often the desire for a future that can recapture past values and move beyond present difficulties. Through the characters' recognition of human values and through Wilson's use of evocative language, the audience is usually left sensing the possibility of achievement, particularly in the more recent plays.

* * *

Any discussion of Wilson's plays can easily be organized around the settings he uses: California, the Midwest, New Mexico, and the East. Two early California plays are related: a one-act play called *The Sand Castle* (1965) and the autobiographical, full-length play *Lemon Sky* (1968). Both plays use narrators who address the audience directly, and both present a similar image of the chaos of California life.

In *The Sand Castle* the shifting sands of the title refer to the lack of stability of the California family on whom the play centers. The particular problem grows out of a mother's betrayal by her daughter. Irene, the mother, discovers that her daughter, Joan, has seduced Irene's boyfriend, Clint.

Clint demonstrates Wilson's ambivalent use of a Western figure. On the one hand, he seemingly provides a criticism of stereotyped Western machismo. Irene, who is an intelligent woman, a published poet, recognizes the irony in her attraction to Clint:

Well, you're Marlboro Country and the Camel Man and Randolph Scott, it's just ridiculous. All the things that we're supposed to believe are masculine and red-blooded in the pulp fiction sense. Your dreadful speech and your laughable—almost self-conscious clumsiness and your honest sincerity and middle-class, proletarian sensibility and even your total lack of good

looks. (20-21)

Yet Clint offers Irene an alternative to the flux of life on the California shore. He wants to marry her so they can move inland to Fresno or spend the weekends in the mountains. But Irene has been seduced by the California life (she no longer writes), and she refuses Clint's offer.

This seeming archetypal Westerner cannot resist Joan's seduction and therefore demonstrates that Western masculine values are also susceptible to instability just as is the sandstone base for Sunset Cliffs, which crumble during the play. Thus, Clint is an ambivalent figure, one who represents many of the positive values in Wilson's world, but also one who lacks the capacity to resist the lure of California's open lifestyle.

Wilson's next California play, *Lemon Sky*, was apparently influenced by Tennessee Williams' approach in *The Glass Menagerie*, for it also uses a narrator who looks back upon his problematic relationship with a parent. The father, Douglas, had abandoned the son, Alan, as a child and had gone west where he married and started a new family. As the play begins, Alan is twenty-nine, looking back to age seventeen when he went to San Diego to live with his father.

The play presents alternating attitudes about California. On the one hand, its mythic status as the land of the gold rush and the place where dreams are made flesh is appealing to young Alan, as he hopes to find what he calls the "promised land" of California and the loving father about whom he had dreamt. What he finds instead is first a dismal bus ride through the southern California desert and then an equally arid relationship with Doug. Of Californians, Alan concludes that they're "mad. They are. The shoes they wear, when they wear shoes; the clothes they wear, when they wear clothes. This place is impossible." California movies are

unrealistic, he says, because the filmmakers are "working in the dark."

In fact, the title refers to the unreal color of southern California, a land of "continual sunshine" where "the color green does not occur . . . naturally." Rather, Alan remarks, "Southern California is in the colors of perpetually early autumn: umber, amber, olive, sienna, ocher, orange; acres and acres of mustard and sage" (70).

Alan's relationship with Doug proves to be as deflating as his finding that California is not the place of his dreams. Doug is not the father Alan has always wanted. Instead he is a man driven by stereotyped definitions of manhood. In fact, Doug's life has been motivated by his desire to be a "real man," one who recognizes his worth by making as many female conquests as possible. He wishes to apply the same standard to Alan, and when Alan fails to pursue women vigorously, Doug reacts vehemently.

Although *Lemon Sky* is an early Wilson play, it demonstrates several recognizable Wilson traits: it concerns a significant time in a character's life, one when a character's past betrayal is challenged; it questions traditional Western values of machismo; it emphasizes the need for communication; it challenges some standard Western myths; it demonstrates several of Wilson's favorite stylistic devices—particularly direct audience address, overlapping dialogue, and indirect chronology; and it presents California negatively because of its lack of rootedness and order.

Despite its importance in Wilson's development, *Lemon Sky* got mixed reviews when it was first staged. T. E. Kalem in *Time* dismissed it as a worn-out idea, "one of those plays about a sensitive adolescent living in a troubled family under the wrathful eye of a callous and cruel parent (usually the father) who subsequently becomes a sensitive young playwright who writes such plays as *Lemon Sky*." And John Simon, in his inimitable way, reacted

similarly, labeling the play "Piranian—a play that wants to be Pirandellian, but halfheartedly stops halfway." When the play was revived in December 1985 with Jeff Daniels playing the lead (a young Christopher Walken had the original role with Charles Durning as the father), it received much more positive reviews than it had originally. Wilson had polished the dialogue, but perhaps its better reception can be attributed to the fact that both Wilson and Jeff Daniels had achieved acclaim by 1985.

In 1981 Wilson returned to the California setting with a slight one-act play titled *Thymus Vulgaris*. Evelyn, a thirty-five-year-old former Las Vegas prostitute, arrives at her mother's trailer near Palmdale, California, to tell her that she is to be married to "Solly—Maidblest—Soretti," the grapefruit king of forty-two states. Evelyn met Solly at the "club," and because she was the only girl to help him overcome his "difficulty," he asked her to marry him. When Evelyn comes to get her mother Ruby to come to the wedding, she finds the trailer overgrown with an herb planted by one of Ruby's last lovers. The plant, *thymus vulgaris*, has crowded everything else out.

Again, Wilson presents the California setting negatively. Both Evelyn and Ruby, as the title suggests, are common and vulgar. Both only dimly perceive any potential for their lives. Their dialogue is a tissue of corrupted clichés ("Spit while the iron's hot"). Yet, like the skunks in Robert Lowell's poem, "Skunk Hour," there is something vital about these characters that suggests that they, like Lowell's skunks and the weed that gives the play its title, will endure. In their rootlessness and searching for stability, they connect with other Wilson characters, and he presents them with condescending affection.

These California plays, therefore, indicate Wilson's use of the East/West dichotomy. California's West is attractive and beckoning,

but its world lacks the rootedness of work and family. Yet, the Midwest, particularly in Wilson's early Midwestern plays, does not seem to be a place where the values in which Wilson believes can flourish.

Both *This Is the Rill Speaking* (1965) and *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1966) use various unidentified, rural Midwestern settings. They especially demonstrate the younger Wilson's satirical attitude toward the stifling attitudes of small-town life.

Wilson returned to his Midwestern background in *This Is the Rill Speaking* after he realized that he should write about what he knew best, explaining to *Rolling Stone* that the "New York sound was so overwhelming" that he "couldn't write fast enough. After awhile I thought, here I am, this hillbilly person writing all these New York plays. What am I doing? The sound of Missouri—I know that better than I know anything."

Wilson describes the play as "a play for voices with people seated in chairs." This short, early play—first produced on 20 July 1965 at Caffe Cino—presents in microcosm many of Wilson's continuing concerns, especially his abiding ambivalence toward rural Midwestern life. On the one hand, these voices reveal people who are small-minded, hypocritical, gossip-ridden, sexually repressed, blind to the simple beauty of their world, and confined to deadening routines where they intrude judgmentally on the lives of others or dream of unrealizable futures.

On the other hand, the simple beauty of that world exists, waiting for the artist to give it voice. Willy, the budding artist figure in the play, wants to write "all about here. Only it'd be about the Nature around us all the time and that we never notice." The rill, from the song "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" ("I love thy rocks and rills"), will speak in Willy's writing and say: "They've been tearing down that old bridge down by the fork there." Thus,

the inhabitants, numbed to beauty by routine, allow their connections to a past that offers meaning—the railroad bridge—to be destroyed.

Stylistically, *This Is the Rill Speaking* also demonstrates some of the experimental techniques Wilson has continued to use: overlapping dialogue, mood lighting, minimal set, and simultaneous action.

The Rimers of Eldritch extends these techniques and themes into a full-length play. An unsentimental *Our Town*, *The Rimers of Eldritch* attacks the small-mindedness of small-town Midwestern life. The members of the church in this community are as hypocritical and pinched-faced as the Ladies of the Law and Order League ever thought about being in John Ford's *Stagecoach*. Like Preston Jones' plays, *Rimers* centers on a dying town. One of the central images used to portray the town's death is a traditional Western one: the vision of "tumbleweed blowing down the deserted streets" (29). Patsy, described as the "prettiest girl in town," is told that there are no tumbleweeds in Eldritch, but the vision is reinforced by other characters who explain how Eldritch has dried up since the mines stopped producing.

Another pervasive image of the dying town is an old race car ("rusting away—flaking away"). One of the local boys had driven the car in races, ostensibly bringing glory to the town, until he was killed in an accident and his car was dragged back to town, where the chain and axle broke, leaving the car to demonstrate the second law of thermodynamics and fall into disorder.

Yet another image of the dying town, familiar to readers of Larry McMurtry's Western fiction, is the last picture show. Eldritch's "movie house been closed down eight years," so the kids have to go to Centerville to the movies and are scorned by Centervilleans who look down on people from Eldritch.

But the central event of the play, one that is revealed in piecemeal,

repetitious fashion, similar to the unveiling of Snowden's secret in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, is the death of Skelly, the local outcast eccentric. Like Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the mysterious title character in the film *Raggedy Man*, Skelly wanders the streets of Eldritch, looking in windows and snooping on parked cars. His heart is right, the audience knows, but the townspeople think that he is potentially dangerous. To accuse him of having sex with animals, the kids call out "Baaa," suggesting his supposed infatuation with sheep. Ultimately, the sheep image points to Skelly's sacrificial role in the community. No shepherd for the pastoral ideal, he becomes a martyr to the town's repressive hysteria.

Before the play ends, the audience learns that Skelly was shot to death by a local woman when he tried to help a crippled girl who had goaded a boy into an attempted rape. Neither child will tell the truth; through Wilson's dramatic irony, only the audience understands. Thus, the audience is left knowing that this Hadleyburg will keep its beliefs untested and will continue to die. Unlike in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Raggedy Man*, the truth will not out, nor will the hermit receive his just recognition in *The Rimers of Eldritch*. The town, therefore, remains blanketed with rime, a dense, chilling hoarfrost that covers everything.

Early reviews were mixed, as generally has been the case for most of Wilson's plays. One reviewer praised it for combining "humor, compassion, anger and suspense in a kind of social protest version of *Our Town*" (*Variety* 22 Feb. 1967: 64). Others found its experimental techniques—minimal set and properties, collage, and fragmented chronology—too derivative of Thornton Wilder and of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*.

One of the primary differences between Wilson's early plays and most of his later ones is the change from the harshly pessimistic and critical outlook of *Rimers* to a more upbeat, positive approach.

He explained to Scott Haller that "it's very easy for me to be pessimistic, . . . to be solidly optimistic and find moments of hope and reason to live is more difficult. I would rather have something positive to say, just because it's more difficult." Part of the change came from watching the audience reactions in the lobby at intermission of the urban tragedy, *Serenading Louie*:

I used to stand in the lobby and watch people come out of the theatre, rush to the water fountain and take a tranquilizer. I didn't want to do that to an audience. I decided I had to find something more positive to say. So I made "Hot l" a comedy. (*Life*, June 1980: 30)

Coupled with his desire for a more positive statement was another idea that finally took form. As he and Marshall Mason were working late at the Circle Rep, building new seating units and varnishing seats, they heard a Steve Goodman song on the radio, "The City of New Orleans," made popular by Arlo Guthrie. Wilson says he turned to Mason and "told him that in the back of my mind there was this other thing that I wanted to do. A lament for the lost railroads. So Marshall said, 'Do it.' And the next day in the office I began to write 'The Hot l Baltimore'" (*After Dark* June 1978: 39).

Although *The Hot l Baltimore* takes place in an urban Eastern setting, it is important to Wilson's outlook as a Midwestern playwright. Along with *The Mound Builders*, *Hot l* is a transitional play that led Wilson to reexamine his attitudes toward the Midwest more fully than he had in his early, harshly satirical Midwestern plays.

As in many other Wilson plays, *The Hot l Baltimore* centers on the destruction of something from the past. In this play it is the old hotel, the architectural object which serves as the setting and gives the play its title. The stage directions indicate its past:

"The Hotel Baltimore, built in the 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. It is scheduled for demolition." The "e" on the "Hotel Baltimore" sign has burned out, and now the management has decided to raze the building and dislocate the inhabitants who are the focus of the play.

Among them is Bill, the night clerk and the closest to a main character in the play. Somewhat jaded and cynical because of his job, Bill is nonetheless open to being affected by the innocent exuberance of the Girl (who can be innocent despite being a whore). It is the Girl who provides the connections to the past and who advances Wilson's purpose to write a lament for the lost railroads. It is she who knows the train schedules and voices the lament: "Silver Star is due in at four-nineteen; she's more than three damn hours late. I get so mad at them for not running on time. I mean it's their own damn schedule, I don't know why they can't keep to it" (15).

Both the railroads and the Girl are associated with the West: on the wall above the front desk is "a Rivera-style mural depicting the railroad's progress westward"; she is from Arizona. She is the one who demonstrates vitality, compassion, and a belief in the individual's ability to accomplish tasks. When Paul Granger comes looking for evidence of his grandfather, the Girl tells him, "[O]f course, you can find him" and she convinces the others to help, as well. It is she who has a sense of geography and has travelled to "Denver. Amarillo. Wichita. Oklahoma City. Salt Lake City. Fort Worth. Dallas. Houston . . .," recalling the train in the Steve Goodman song.

One of Wilson's techniques here is to pair characters. The Girl is connected with the night clerk because of his response to her.

Pulled out of his cynicism, Bill begins to express his feelings for her, especially during one of the scenes in which Wilson uses overlapping dialogue. While the others in the lobby argue about various things, Bill tells the Girl: "I just wish you were old enough or mature enough to know what you're throwing away" (58). The dialogue indicates that the Girl represents the theme of loss that permeates the play through the dying railroads and the soon-to-be-destroyed hotel.

While the Girl remains vital through connections with the past, two other characters—Mr. Katz, the hotel manager, and Mrs. Oxenham, the day clerk—represent the unfeeling modern world, where people often perform mechanical work. These two characters demonstrate the cold efficiency that functions without compassion. Mrs. Oxenham, for example, responds emotionlessly to Paul Granger's requests for help in looking for records concerning his grandfather's stay at the hotel. Mr. Katz responds comparably to Mrs. Bellotti, despite her wrenching stories about troubles with her alcoholic son, Horse, who has been evicted from the hotel, and about her husband, who lost his leg because of diabetes.

Other pairs are Milly and Mr. Morse, representatives of the past; Suzy and April, who foreshadow what the Girl will become; and Jamie and Jackie, who indicate the debasement of family in the modern world. Rootless and disconnected, Jackie searches for meaning in health food magazines and is a prime candidate for a worthless land scam.

The two whores, Suzy and April, provide considerable humor, much of which is bawdy. Whenever April joins the crowd in the lobby, she begins by recounting a story about one of her johns. For example, she tells of one customer who decided he wanted to have sex in the tub, even though all the hotel had was hot water. When he got in, it "nearly scalded his balls off":

Yeaah! Spanking red from the butt down. Loved it. Stayed in for twenty minutes. Very groovy experience for him. If I knew he was coming, I'd have dug out the rubber duck. (109)

Through Milly, Wilson introduces the idea of connecting with a spirit that transcends physical reality. It is an idea that has become a leitmotif in Wilson's work, appearing subtly in several plays. Milly's spiritualism is ambiguous, for it is presented unfavorably in the notes where she is described as having "[e]legance marred by an egocentric spiritualism." Yet her discussion of ghosts enhances Wilson's theme of connections with the past, and she provides hope. When the Girl hears Milly talk of spirits, she exclaims: "I want everyone to see them and talk to them. Something like that! Some miracle. Something huge! I want some major miracle in my lifetime!" (92). Millie also provides some hope for Paul Granger, telling him, "Your grandfather is alive, Paul. . . . I don't know how I know. . . . I just know he isn't dead" (104). Paul loses faith, and the audience never discovers if Milly's vision is true, but the leitmotif that enters this play ambiguously returns more positively in later plays.

The conclusion of *The Hot l Baltimore* is also somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Paul Granger apparently gives up his search, and the "bulldozers are barking at the door." But the final image is positive: April and Jamie dance to a song on the radio. (Although the song is not identified as "The City of New Orleans," some productions have used it.) A few moments earlier, Suzy had burst back in after leaving angrily to exclaim: "I'm sorry. I know you love me. I can't leave like that. Mr. Morse. We been like a family, haven't we? My family" (135-36).

The final positive image, coupled with the play's humor and compassion, allowed Wilson the positive statement he wished at the time. In fact, *The Hot l Baltimore* fulfills many of the traditional

expectations of comedy, which usually is concerned with people in society and ends with the return of social order. *Hot l's* conclusion is similar to the traditional ending in comedy that Northrop Frye described in *Anatomy of Criticism*:

The appearance of this new society is frequently signaled by some kind of party or festive ritual, which either appears at the end of the play or is assumed to take place immediately afterward. (163-64)

Where *Hot l* follows many of the traditional elements of comedy, Wilson's next major play, *The Mound Builders* (1975) is more closely aligned with tragedy, which Jeffrey Cox defines as confronting "the gaps that arise between the life of man and an extra-human order, an enclosing order that might . . . be conceived of as the will of the gods, the power of fate, the providential plan of god, or even the rhythms of life and death." Even though Wilson had expressed his desire to write more positive plays, he found that his characters began to control the direction of the plays, leading almost independent lives.

Like *The Hot l Baltimore*, *The Mound Builders* is concerned with preserving the past, but it is a complex play, one that does not lead to a simplistic conclusion that we must preserve the past. Rather, its genesis came as Wilson asked, "Why do we work? And why do we create?" The play attempts to answer those questions. Its tragic overtones arise from the disparity between what the characters wish their work to accomplish and "the power of fate" that opposes their wishes.

While *Hot l* only looks to the West, *The Mound Builders* leads Wilson back toward home because much of the action takes place in "Blue Shoals, Illinois—located in the extreme south of that state, in the five-state area of Kentucky, Missouri, Indiana, Arkansas, and Illinois—at the confluence of the Wabash, Cumberland, Ohio,

and Mississippi Rivers.”

The setting where the play begins is Urbana, Illinois, in Professor August Howe's study. As in other plays, Wilson creates a frame for the main action, so that he can emphasize the significance of the action on the characters' lives. Like *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Mound Builders* is a memory play. The frame also allows Wilson—again as Tennessee Williams does—to use cinematic techniques. In this case, the back wall of the set functions as the screen for back-projected slides of the previous summer, when the primary action of the play occurred.

The subject of the play is a fictional archaeological dig into sites associated with the Mississippian culture, a collection of Indian tribes that flourished from about 600-1100 A.D. and then disappeared, leaving only some large mounds and the mystery surrounding the disappearance of a seemingly advanced civilization. The mounds are the creations that a culture has left, and they partially answer the questions that Wilson posed to himself about why mankind works and creates.

Professor Howe answers the questions, too, saying, “A man's life work is taken up, undertaken, I have no doubt, to blind him to the passing moon” (113). Much of the play focuses on the blindness as Professor Howe and his assistant Dan Loggins spend their summer at the dig.

Dan also answers the questions about why we build and create, saying that humans find various reasons to explain their need to build:

They built the mounds for the same reason I'd build the mounds. Because I wanted to make myself conspicuous; to sacrifice to the gods; to protect me from floods, or animals; because my grandfather built mounds; because I was sick of digging holes; because I didn't have the technology to build

pyramids and a person isn't happy unless he's building something. (22)

Dan goes on to note that as societies advance, "their rationalization for building . . . becomes more sophisticated." But beneath it all is an innate human desire to create.

For Dan and August, their work that summer is hugely successful. They discover the grave of what must have been a "god-king" because of the items buried in the gravesite, particularly a gold death mask. It is probably going to be "the most important archaeological dig in America." When August's department chairman hears of the discovery, he begins thinking of having his picture on the cover of *Newsweek*. Dan believes there is "a man's life work here."

Neither August nor Dan, however, had anticipated the violence of Chad Jasker's response to their discovery. Chad, the son of the man who owns the land, has spent the last few summers hanging around the diggings. The summer before he had been infatuated with Jean, who is now Dan's wife and pregnant with their first child. This summer he sneaks out at night with Cynthia, August's wife, and makes subtle advances to Dan.

Like other Wilson plays, *The Mound Builders* is concerned with betrayal, and Chad is the victim. For Chad, the land represents his future. He and his father plan to develop the area as the new interstate highway comes through, and they have been negotiating to have a Holiday Inn built there. Dan and August, however, knowing the importance of the mounds, have used a 1954 law about defacing Indian monuments to have the interstate highway rerouted around the area. They have not told Chad, and after he discovers what they have done, he destroys all of their findings, bulldozes the mounds with the god-king's grave, and apparently disappears with Dan into the bottom of the lake.

The sense of tragedy arises not only from the deaths but also because of the destruction of work and family, two areas that Wilson values. Nothing remains of the archaeological finds, not even the photographs, because Cynthia destroyed them out of loyalty to Chad. (Therefore, for the audience to see some slides of their findings projected on the back wall requires a willing suspension of disbelief.) Without Dan, August can no longer work, and his marriage to Cynthia has ended. The one hopeful glimmer comes through Jean's baby, but the audience learns nothing about its birth and potential for the future.

Besides the themes of work, family, and betrayal, this play is concerned with lost connections to the past, and it is the first major play in which Wilson displays an interest in his Indian past. (He is one-eighth Osage.) In his introduction to *The Gingham Dog*, Wilson laments: "We're raping our land. Ignoring (deeply, truly) the Indian, the black man, and each other." Throughout *The Mound Builders* Wilson points to the similarity between ancient Indian and modern American culture, especially the desire to create that ties cultures together. There is also a suggestion of the power of a transcendent spirit, perhaps fate, similar to the spiritual power mentioned by Milly in *The Hot l Baltimore*.

Although his use of factual information about Indian cultures is central to the play, Wilson has not simply endorsed the anthropologists who protect heritage and opposed the developers who destroy it. While Wilson's sympathy is with those who preserve, in several ways he presents August and Dan's being blinded "to the passing moon," just as Chad is. They ignore human concerns while they throw themselves into their work.

Wilson has commented that *The Mound Builders* is his favorite play, and its complexity makes it perhaps his most satisfying play to read. It is probably his most literate play as well, filled with

allusions to literature (Salinger, Camus), psychology (Otto Rank), and anthropology. It was, nonetheless, not a theatrical success, partially because the complexity that engages readers became problematic for some reviewers as they evaluated the play's theatricality. Harold Clurman in *The Nation* found it "provocative and unmistakably felt. What weakens it is that much of its detail is diffuse and ill-digested" (15 Mar 1975: 315).

When it was revived in January 1986 in a slightly revised version (Kirsten, August's and Cynthia's daughter, was no longer a character), the play fared little better at the hands of the critics. Frank Rich in *The New York Times* thought that the play had "fragments of interest," but they were "buried beneath mounds, if not mountains, of talk" (1 Feb. 1986).

Wilson's next plays after *The Mound Builders*, however, were much more successful, and these are his plays about the Talley family from Lebanon, Missouri, Wilson's birthplace. Three related plays—*5th of July* (1978), *Talley's Folly* (1980), and *Talley & Son* (1985)—concern the Talleys and have deep connections with Wilson's past, as Mel Gussow explains:

When Lanford Wilson was growing up in Ozark, Missouri, there was a large rambling farmhouse on Harper's Hill, overlooking the Finley River and the town. The building was almost plantation-size and represented something awesome, unattainable, and mysterious—a haunted house to the neighborhood children. (30)

Originally Wilson did not plan to write a series of plays:

I didn't sit down and say, "I'm going to write a play cycle." . . . It just happened. I started working on a single play to be called "The War in Lebanon," which was to take place in 1944 or '45. But when I sat down and worked out the history of the Talley family, I realized immediately that

it was very exciting and complex, especially if you dissect the family's fortunes at specific times—the Civil War, World War I and II, maybe Korea, and Vietnam. (*New York Times* 17 Feb 1980: 33)

In April 1978 Wilson's *5th of July* opened at the Circle Repertory Theater in New York and ran for 168 performances. Although Wilson originally envisioned the play for the bicentennial, in the final version *5th of July* begins on Independence Day 1977 and ends the next day, taking place in the Talleys' sprawling house near Lebanon. Ken Talley, Jr., who lost his legs in combat in Vietnam, has returned to the family home with his homosexual lover, Jed. During the play, past betrayals are exposed, and eventually the Talleys are reconciled to their past. As before, Wilson uses a Chekhovian situation for dramatic impact. In this case the Talley farmhouse near Lebanon functions as Chekhov's cherry orchard did.

Ken has come from his home in St. Louis ostensibly to celebrate the holiday and to help his Aunt Sally distribute the ashes of her late husband, Matt Friedman, in the nearby river. Ken's main purpose, however, is to convince his old friends, John and Gwen Landis, to buy the Talley house. John and Ken had been childhood friends before John met and later married Gwen, heiress to a copper fortune, while all three were students at Berkeley. The other characters are Ken's friend, Jed, a botanist who has been living and tending plants on the farm; Ken's sister, June, who once was in love with John; June's fourteen-year-old daughter, Shirley; and Wes, Gwen Landis' composer friend.

As in other Wilson plays the drama takes place at a significant time in the lives of these characters when all are about to make important decisions. Also, all the main characters have some important but previously hidden information to confront about themselves and their relations with others. The play's dramatic structure leads

them to unearth the information.

Ken Talley faces two major decisions, one of which concerns his professional future. After the war Ken became certified to teach, but he fears that high school students will be repulsed by a teacher who has to walk with crutches and prostheses. He has, though, been offered a teaching job back in his home town, and he has to decide whether to accept the offer.

His second major decision concerns the farmhouse, the place that connects him to the past. As the play begins, he has apparently decided to refuse the teaching job, sell the farm, and use the proceeds to finance a trip around the world. To do so will cause a rift between him and Jed, because Jed has long-range plans for his plants at the Talley place. He has even rediscovered a long-lost species of rose and had it placed in the Royal Horticultural Society in England.

John Landis also has several reasons to be there. His wife, Gwen, has decided to become a singer, but she has a psychological block when she sings in the studio. They are therefore looking at the Talley place as an alternative studio so she can spend her fortune to advance her career. John's unspoken reason, though, is to see June, for whom he also has an offer. Although it is never made explicit, John is probably Shirley's father. His offer concerns having Shirley live with him, since June is a single parent. With Gwen's wealth, John thinks that he can provide Shirley with a more comfortable life than June can.

One clue to Wilson's purpose comes from the title. This bicentennial play ending the day after Independence Day—the day activity returns to normal—suggests the need to return to some traditional American values to regain equilibrium after the chaos of the sixties and the Vietnam era. Likewise, Aunt Sally's spreading of Matt's ashes provides a counterpointing image of return. So, too, does

Jed's identifying the old species of rose.

Among the traditional values the play endorses are human communication, endurance, compassion, humor, and significant work. As the play begins, Ken tries to decipher a tape-recorded story from a handicapped student named Johnny Young. As the play draws to a close, Ken finally translates the difficult tape and discovers that Johnny Young's message emphasizes survival. The theme of endurance also comes humorously through Wes' black humor Eskimo folk tale about the caribou meat thawed miraculously by a "tremendous, powerful fart."

Most of the humor comes in witty interchanges among the characters, especially from Gwen, who is constantly referring to the many operations she has had. Her humor is often bawdy because during one of her operations the doctors "cut a nerve connected to some sexual response thing so I feel sex like five times as intense as the normal person." Gwen is ecstatic after seeing Shirley looking in the window while John and Gwen make love:

Oh, God, we were caught in the act! It was too fantastic.
I looked back and saw this face at the window. Oh, shit,
spies. No, audience! Oh, God, how fabulous. And like wow,
I really hit the moon. I mean I came like a flash! (24)

Besides emphasizing humor, Wilson also values doing significant work that helps us move into the future while remaining grounded in values of the past. A future full of potential is possible through human effort. Earlier June had spoken of a similar idea when she admonished Shirley for disparaging their actions in the sixties: "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" (62). Ken's teaching is a calling, and it is important work for him to continue.

In fact, part of the impetus for the play came from Wilson's

belief in teaching as significant work, a conclusion he reached after teaching at Southampton College:

I discovered that I had no talent for teaching, so I said, "If you can't teach, write about someone who is a natural teacher and how something happens to completely destroy his style so he's terrified of going back to the classroom. (*New York Times* 7 June 1981: 21.15)

Ken's ambivalence about his calling stems partially from the betrayal he and the other characters must confront: Ken's reasons for being drafted. Originally, Ken, Gwen, and John had planned on a trip to Europe together, but John and Gwen unexpectedly departed a week early and left Ken behind. When Ken and John finally discuss what happened, Ken learns that it was John's decision to leave and break off any relationship with Ken. Ken suddenly realizes that he had lost control of his life by letting himself be drafted. Now is the time he can regain control.

Like *5th of July*, the next play about the Talley family, *Talley's Folly*, depends upon breaking through layers of personal covering before the characters confront hidden knowledge, but *Talley's Folly* takes place on a smaller scale. The play is limited to two people: Sally Talley, the Aunt Sally of *5th of July*; and Matt Friedman, whose ashes are scattered at the end of *5th of July*. Wilson's own characters inspired him to write *Talley's Folly*: "I liked the two characters . . . and I wanted to see the play. I said to myself, if I do it, I should go all the way and make it the sweet valentine it should be. . . ." Second, he wanted to create a history to help Helen Stenborg understand her role as Aunt Sally in *5th of July*. A third important element was Judd Hirsch's association with the Circle Rep company. When Hirsch, who had played Bill, the desk clerk in *Hot l Baltimore*, came to a performance of *5th of July*, Wilson suddenly realized that his image of the younger Matt in-

creasingly took the shape of Hirsch.

Talley's Folly is set on 4 July 1944, thirty-three years before *5th of July*. Matt Friedman, a 42-year-old Jewish accountant from St. Louis, has come to propose to Sally Talley, a 31-year-old nurse, who had seemed to be dedicated to life as an old maid.

The action takes place in a boathouse built by Sally's uncle, Whistler Talley, in 1870. Uncle Whistler had the habit of building the things he wanted to because he "got pleasure out of making things for people" (19). But in a pragmatic community, his buildings were known as Talley's follies, and such is the boathouse where Matt Friedman courts Sally Talley.

A year earlier, she and Matt had had a most unusual experience at the boathouse when they thought they had seen a UFO. In the interim, Sally's family members (except Aunt Charlotte) have tried to convince her that Matt—a dark, urban intellectual who speaks his mind freely—can never become part of their family. Sally, however, is an independent thinker who is appalled by her family's emphasis on making money because the war has made it possible. She is, however, ready to rebuff his proposal, not because of her family's objections, but because she believes she is unsuited for marriage for reasons the play eventually makes clear.

As a result, Sally resists all of Matt's advances until after he tells her his most private experience: the story of his family's persecution in Europe when he was a boy, a story so painful that he can only tell it in third person, calling himself a "probable Lit" (meaning probably from Lithuania). Because of this experience Matt had resolved "never to be responsible for bringing into such a world another child to be killed for a political purpose" (40). At first, Sally reacts angrily, thinking that her Aunt Charlotte has told Matt Sally's secret.

Through Matt's dedication to uncovering the truth, Sally finally

tells why she is angry and why she fears marriage: as a young girl she had contracted a pelvic fever that left her unable to bear children. Harley Campbell ended their engagement, and her father treated her as if she were "a broken swing." Thinking herself no longer suited for marriage, she has resigned herself to a solitary life. When she understands that Matt's resolution never to bring children into such a violent world is truthful, she realizes that she has found someone with a comparable outlook on life, and the play ends in an unequivocally positive way.

Unlike *5th of July*, which is a realistic play, *Talley's Folly* breaks the barrier between audience and stage at the very beginning. Matt Friedman comes onstage and speaks directly to the audience, sounding something like the stage manager in *Our Town*. He explains that the play will take ninety-seven minutes without intermission, and he calls it a "waltz," a "no-holds-barred romantic story," and a "valentine." He also makes it clear that this play is not a realistic one but a romantic fairy tale: "There was a time—or, all right, I think that has to be: Once upon a time—there was a hope throughout the land."

But during this introduction consisting of his casual, humorous, direct address to the audience, he touches upon several of Wilson's important themes, particularly the nature of work and prosperity. After remarking to the audience that worker bees probably live no longer than twenty days and nights, Matt comments: "Work. Work is very much to the point" (4) and gestures to the set, Whistler Talley's boathouse folly.

Underlying these remarks is the Talley family's work that allows them to get rich on the war. (In *Talley & Son* Wilson reveals that the Talley factory makes army fatigue pants.) In a long, serious speech about the relationship between the war and prosperity, Matt comments:

There is a house on the hill up there, and there is a family that is not at peace but in grave danger of prosperity. And there is a girl in the house on the hill up there who is a terrible embarrassment to her family because she remembers that old hope, and questions this new fortune. . . . (5)

Wilson immediately breaks this seriousness by having Matt repeat the entire monologue, racing breathlessly, for the "latecomers."

It is nonetheless clear that *Talley's Folly* is concerned, as are other Wilson plays, with the nature of human work, intolerance, and betrayal. Work dedicated singly to profit, although it has often been glorified in American experience, does not belong in Wilson's pastoral Midwest—nor does the Talley family intolerance that causes Sally's brother, Buddy, to meet Matt Friedman at the door with a shotgun because he is Jewish. The betrayals in this play are private and public: Sally has been betrayed by her family's rejection of her; Matt has been betrayed by the viciousness of the world.

Through Matt and Sally's union Wilson presents the most nearly perfect relationship available in his world. Two independent people who have been buffeted by violence and intolerance but still have compassion and humor find one another. The force that brings them together is only suggested; Matt had given Sally a ride home from a dance the year before, and they both saw a UFO at the boathouse. Whatever spirit or fate (Matt calls it a "mischievous angel") caused the meeting remains a mystery.

Typically for Wilson's plays, *Talley's Folly* received some negative notices, but generally reviewers were enthusiastic. Among the negative reviews, Gerald Weales said it was "little more than an efficient theatre piece," and Robert Brustein called it a "wittily written, carefully manufactured fake." Most reviewers, however, were more positive. Mel Gussow, for example, praised the play and called Wilson "one of our most gifted playwrights, a dramatist who deals

perceptively with definable American themes.” He continued: “In ‘Talley’s Folly,’ he introduces us to two wonderful people, humanizing and warming them with the radiance of his abundant talent. ‘Talley’s Folly’ is a play to savor and to cheer” (*New York Times* 4 May 1979: III.3). Walter Kerr also responded positively: “Mr. Wilson has written it tightly, brightly and honestly with such a beguiling smile that when the house lights come up again to interrupt the principals’ embrace—turning the theatre back into the theatre again—you feel quite as restored as they do. A treasure” (*New York Times* 13 May 1979: II.5).

Wilson was surprised at this response:

I thought it was going to be the most unpopular thing I’d ever written. There was nothing compromised in the writing.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I couldn’t believe it when people liked it. (Haller 26)

The third play in the Talley series reopened in New York in 1985 under a new title. Now called *Talley & Son*, the play opened originally as *A Tale Told* in 1981 to mixed reviews. The play began when Wilson decided that he wanted to write a play for Elizabeth Sturges, one of the members of the Circle Rep:

The only things I knew at the start were that it was in a 1944 household where nobody smokes, certainly not in the parlor. And no one swears. And Aunt Lottie—Liz Sturges—walks through the room smoking a cigarette and saying, “Oh, kiss my ass.” (Haller 29)

This play also has roots in Wilson’s Midwestern experience. He noted after returning to Lebanon years later that the important people of his youth who stayed home had “terrible lives, filled with divorce, impotence, alcoholism, murder and suicide,” and these are the people about whom *Talley & Son* was written.

Talley & Son takes place in the Talley house on 4 July 1944.

It is concerned with the simultaneous events that take place in the house while Matt Friedman courts Sally Talley in the nearby boathouse. On this day, several significant events occur that affect the Talley family.

Eldon Talley and his partner Harley Campbell are trying to decide whether to sell their clothing factory to a conglomerate after the war. Calvin Stuart Talley, who is Eldon's father and the family's patriarch, has fallen into a pattern of days of senility interspersed with hours of clarity. As a result, Eldon does not need his father's approval, for he has had his father declared incompetent. The business deal is complicated, though, by Eldon's two sons' interests in the business. Both sons, Buddy and Timmy, are in the war, but as the play begins, Buddy has returned on furlough because the family thought Old Man Talley was near death.

Before the day is over, the family discovers that Timmy has been killed in the war (but his ghost is a character in the play); the daughter of the family washerwoman comes and tells Eldon that she knows he is actually her father and expects him to provide for her; Sally Talley comes home briefly to get her things before she goes off to St. Louis to marry Matt Friedman; Sally's Aunt Charlotte, who is dying from cancer she apparently got painting radium on clock faces, lives out her last hours hoping that Sally will fulfill her own desires to rebel against the small-minded WASP attitudes of her family.

As in the other Wilson plays, *Talley & Son* concerns characters who uncover some long-dormant facts about themselves and their family, and this play criticizes Midwestern competitive materialism, long upheld as an American strength. Old Man Talley reveals himself to be a ruthless, unfeeling businessman whose only pleasures have been derived from the joys of competition. He becomes clear-headed long enough to maneuver an arrangement that gets rid of Eldon's

illegitimate daughter, Avalaine Platt. Talley arranges for her to marry Emmet Young, the Talley's handyman, and agrees to set Emmet up with a good job at the factory, knowing that the factory is about to be sold to a conglomerate that will transfer the business to Louisiana, and the betrayal will be complete.

But in another twist, Eldon, who has long been charged by his father with being spineless, trades the family's interest in the factory to Harley for Harley's interest in the bank and thus makes his father's arrangement with Avalaine moot. It will cost the Talleys a good deal of money, because Harley will be the only one to profit from the sale of the factory to the conglomerate. But it provides Eldon with one chance to separate himself from his father.

It also means that Eldon will not be the one to give up the factory; Harley will. Despite his adultery and previous lack of courage in facing his father, Eldon Talley is presented positively in part because he believes in the value of the good workmanship that has gone into his company's product. He has personally inspected the fatigues that the factory makes, and Timmy reemphasizes their durability, as well, by telling a story of his experiences.

The conglomerate that takes over will have much less interest in good work. As Eldon notes, he is in "the business of making fatigue pants," but the company's representative says, "Well, we're in the business of making money" (50). Charlotte's cancer, the product of the American factory system, is apparently a metaphor for what Wilson thinks is wrong with this world based on a "go ahead, get ahead" mentality.

Its newest title indicates the play's concern with business. In fact, each title provides an interesting insight into the play. The original, *War in Lebanon*, had a dual meaning, for it referred to the effect of World War II on the inhabitants of Lebanon, Missouri, and it suggested the internal struggle in the Talley family. It also

indicated Wilson's use of wars (WW II here, Vietnam in *5th of July*) to provide focus in his plays. The second title, *A Tale Told*, comes from Psalm 90, a passage that serves as the epigraph for the published version of *Talley & Son*: "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told." This passage emphasizes the "secret sins" that come back to haunt the characters and provide the basis for the narrative.

The current title, *Talley & Son*, calls forth the two important themes of family and work. On the one hand, the struggles between two sets of fathers and sons—Old Man Talley and Eldon, Eldon and Buddy—are important to the play. Literally, the title is the name of the family business. In the revision Wilson completely rewrote the final scene to strengthen Eldon's character and make the father/son struggle one of the play's principal concerns.

Wilson's presentation of Timmy is particularly interesting. As noted, other Wilson plays have often pointed subtly to the existence of a transcendent spirit, but Timmy's ghostly presence in *Talley & Son* brings the leitmotif into the foreground. Timmy becomes something of a chorus, a counterpoint to the competitive power-mongering of the rest of the Talleys. Timmy communicates with Lottie, another positive character who opposes the way the family functions. And Timmy demonstrates an appreciation for the land. When he sees Tinian Island in the Pacific, he responds positively because it is "the first real farm island we've come across," and he feels "witched," overcome by the beauty of the island because it reminds him of the beauty of his home.

The play ends ambiguously, for Timmy and Lottie, the two most sympathetic characters, are either dead or dying. For those who know Wilson's other Talley plays, though, the hope comes through

Buddy and Olive's offspring, Ken and June of *5th of July*, and especially through the union of Sally Talley and Matt Friedman.

These three Talley plays demonstrate Lanford Wilson's complex connection with other Western and Midwestern writers. Behind the plays remains an acute but ironic awareness of traditional American values, many of which have been lost or more likely corrupted through time. It is no coincidence that the three plays take place on Independence Day. The spirit of the place leads the characters to search for some connections to the past, and as they do so, they often discover that they have ignored some of their own desires or failed to confront their deepest fears. Wilson, therefore, has no simplistic attitude about how wonderful the good old days were; he acknowledges the limitations and follies. But he also suggests that too often the present compounds the errors of the past, particularly when past problems are ignored. All of these plays concern the need to unearth the past and are central to Wilson's work.

In 1982 Wilson left the Talley family to write *Angels Fall*, which is set in New Mexico. The play was commissioned for the New World Festival in Miami, but Wilson was having trouble coming up with an idea. He recalls how an image came to him:

Suddenly, I saw the inside of this mission and these people who had been detained. A woman throwing her purse down on a bench and saying, "Is this the pits?" and this other guy going "Ohhhhh, rah-thah. . . ." It was very strange to get a flash like that, and it was so startling I went with it. Pretty soon, all six characters came to me, all of them in various states of crisis. (Shewey 18)

Because of a nuclear accident at a uranium mine that closes all the roads, several travelers seek refuge at a mission and confront the possibility of the end of the world. Niles Harris, a fifty-six-year-

old art history professor, is traveling with his thirty-year-old wife, Vita, from their home in Providence, Rhode Island, to a psychological treatment center in Arizona. Harris has had a crisis of faith concerning his teaching, and the administrators at his college have asked him to undergo therapy.

Also forced to stop in the mission are Marion Clay, a recently widowed art gallery owner in her early forties, and Salvatore "Zappy" Zappala, a twenty-one-year-old professional tennis player. Marion began managing Zappy's career before her husband died, and now they are lovers.

The parish priest, Father William Doherty, welcomes the travelers but is himself in the throes of a personal crisis. His favorite parishioner, a brilliant half-Indian named Don Tabaha, had planned to return to New Mexico and minister to sick Indians on various reservations, but Don has recently decided to accept instead a lucrative offer to go to California and join a scientific research firm.

The setting—the ancient New Mexican desert threatened by nuclear holocaust—offers a similar juxtaposition of past versus present, as we find in the main characters' conflicts. The art professor has discovered the relativism of the modern age and is immobilized by it. The priest discovers that he has made his personal goal—that young Don commit himself to the old way of life—a singular mission even though Don's accepting the modern world and doing cancer research might ultimately benefit millions.

In this play Wilson returns to his concern with discovering what one's proper work should be. Father Doherty emphasizes this theme when he finds a biblical passage about the apocalypse: "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" (89-90). He goes on to advise Niles that he must return to his teaching, for being a teacher, like being a priest, is a calling:

So you simply have to find a way to teach. One of those professions, I've always thought, one is called to. As an artist is called, or a priest is called, or as a doctor is called. (90) Even the tennis player believes himself called, and he relates the moment when he was eleven, and he knew he would be a tennis player.

In several ways *Angels Fall* suggests one of the continuing frontier paradigms in American literature: the captivity narrative. From early Puritan captivity narratives through James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales to Sam Shepard's *Operation Sidewinder*, American writers have concentrated on characters who are captured (usually by Indians) on the American frontier and who ultimately undergo metamorphosis as a result of the experience. As Richard Slotkin makes clear in *Regeneration Through Violence* the transformation often results from a violent confrontation, but in Wilson's play, the vehicle is the threat of apocalyptic violence and the characters' evocative language, as they spend their time—as they should when facing possible annihilation—asking ultimate questions.

While Wilson refrains from presenting a violent confrontation, he also stops short of presenting any clear redemption. As the play ends, Don Tabaha leaves for his high-paying research job; Niles and Vita continue on their way to the sanitarium; Zappy will catch a flight to his next tournament; and Father Doherty "begins ringing the bell to call the congregation to Mass as the lights fade." The title, taken from a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, also mutes the emphasis on redemption.

In the end, Wilson provides no ultimate answers for these characters, but like other Wilson plays, *Angels Fall* is concerned with the destruction of the past, emphasizes the need for doing significant work, and presents a strong anti-materialistic theme.

* * *

It is clear that Lanford Wilson demonstrates varied connections with and influences of other playwrights. His plays provide marked similarities with other Western American playwrights such as William Saroyan, Preston Jones, Sam Shepard, and Mark Medoff. Like them he draws from his own experiences in the West and Midwest for plot, dialogue, and theme. Like Saroyan, he has written plays that throw a variety of misfits together. Like Preston Jones, Wilson writes ambivalently about the values connected with the past but with an abiding sense of place. Like Shepard, Wilson experiments with style and has awareness of the power of myth. Like Medoff, Wilson often writes about the difficulty in and the need for communication.

But Wilson's dramatic influences go beyond his connections with Western dramatists. Perhaps the strongest influence in many ways remains Tennessee Williams, another playwright with Midwestern ties. Williams' St. Louis play, *The Glass Menagerie*, was a clear forerunner of Wilson's *Lemon Sky*. And Wilson knew and worked with Williams during his lifetime. Another important influence is Chekhov; many of Wilson's plays draw on Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and use an impending threat to a cherished emblem of the past for their dramatic focus. And there are echoes of many other plays and playwrights: Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*, Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, and William Inge's *Bus Stop* and *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*.

In assessing Wilson's work, Mel Gussow looks less to dramatists for influences than to novelists:

In thinking about his American artistic forbears, one looks

less to playwrights than to novelists such as Willa Cather, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. Wilson begins as a regionalist but becomes national. He is definably an American playwright, rooted in the farms and hills of his Ozark birthplace and also in the streets and cafes of his adopted city, New York. (32)

One especially interesting aspect of Wilson's writing is his repertory approach, particularly the importance of the company of actors at the Circle Rep. Over the years Wilson has written for specific actors: *Talley's Folly* for Judd Hirsch and *Talley & Son* for Liz Sturges are two examples. But his writing is influenced in other ways by that association. He approaches the script as a draft through all the early stages, through early rehearsals, and even through opening performances. He listens carefully to the readings and weighs the actors' and directors' suggestions, often revising and rearranging based upon those comments. Then, he attends to critical comments. Throughout his career, Wilson has made a practice of revising his works after they have opened. As in the case of *Talley & Son*, sometimes the plays are revised extensively. In other cases such as the revision of *Lemon Sky*, the revisions are small and stylistic.

While the revising process is methodical, Wilson often depends on spontaneity when he writes plays. He has often commented on the suddenness with which ideas come to him. And he also mentions how his characters begin to dominate the direction of his plays, almost as if they have lives of their own. For example, he has said that he had hoped that Don Tabaha in *Angels Fall* would stay on the reservation, but to his dismay, the character left.

Despite all his work, Wilson has received little critical notice in academic circles, particularly compared to his younger contemporary, Sam Shepard. He was the subject of a *Dictionary of Literary*

Biography article by Ann Crawford Dreher in 1981. In 1984 two dissertations on Wilson were completed, one by Laurence Myers on "Characterization in Lanford Wilson's Plays" at Kent State University; the other by Nicholas Leland at the University of California, Santa Barbara, titled "A Critical Analysis of the Major Plays of Lanford Wilson." As yet, few critical articles have appeared, but a study in the Twayne's United States Authors Series is scheduled for publication in 1987.

Despite limited recognition by academic critics, these plays demonstrate that Lanford Wilson is one of our most distinguished playwrights. Now fifty, with over forty plays and numerous awards, Wilson shows every sign of continuing his long and productive career. A playwright with the gift of language and character, one with deep Midwestern roots and an emphasis on the values of meaningful work, the paradoxical need for individuality and community, and the past, Lanford Wilson will no doubt continue to light up the Great White Way and Off-Broadway, and he will gain the academic recognition he deserves. But he writes not for the recognition, but to satisfy the human desire to create something that transcends time. When Don Shewey asked Wilson why he writes, he answered by recalling the lines spoken by August Howe in *The Mound Builders*: "Why . . . is probably answered in that speech. . . . To blind myself to the passing moon. To forget time."

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