

Lanford Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Playwright, Dies at 73

By Margalit Fox

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Lanford Wilson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose work — earthy, realist, greatly admired, widely performed — centered on the sheer ordinariness of marginality, died on Thursday in Wayne, N.J. He was 73 and lived in Sag Harbor, on Long Island.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, said Marshall W. Mason, a director and longtime collaborator who is widely considered the foremost interpreter of Mr. Wilson's work.

One of the most distinguished American playwrights of the late 20th century, Mr. Wilson was considered instrumental in drawing attention to Off Off Broadway, where his first works were staged in the mid-1960s. He was also among the first playwrights to move from that milieu to renown on wider stages, ascending to Off Broadway, and then to Broadway with no Off's whatsoever, within a decade of his arrival in New York.

His work has also long been a staple of regional theaters throughout the United States.

Mr. Wilson won the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for drama for "Talley's Folly," which played 286 performances on Broadway that year. A one-act, two-character comedy set in his hometown, Lebanon, Mo., the play chronicled the romantic fortunes of a Jewish man (played by Judd Hirsch) and a Protestant woman (Trish Hawkins) in 1944.

"Talley's Folly" was an installment in Mr. Wilson's Talley Cycle, an eventual trilogy. The cycle also comprised "Talley & Son," which played Off Broadway in 1985 and also looked in on the Talley family in 1944; and "Fifth of July," which takes up the family's story in 1977.

"Fifth of July," a comedy that explores the disillusionment of the Vietnam era, came to Broadway in November of 1980. The production, which starred Christopher Reeve as Kenneth Talley Jr., a gay, paraplegic Vietnam veteran, ran for 511 performances at the New Apollo Theater; it also starred Jeff Daniels and Swoosie Kurtz.

Reviewing the production in The New York Times, Frank Rich wrote: "Mr. Wilson has poured the full bounty of his gifts into this work, and they are the gifts of a major playwright. 'Fifth of July' is a densely packed yet buoyant outpouring of empathy, poetry and humor, all shaped into a remarkable vision."

Mr. Wilson's other Broadway plays include "Burn This" (1987), "Angels Fall" (1983) and "Redwood Curtain" (1993).

His Off Broadway work included "The Hot l Baltimore," about the denizens of a down-at-the-heels residential hotel. The play was the basis of a short-lived television sitcom of the same name, broadcast on ABC in 1975.



Lanford Wilson at home in Sag Harbor, New York, in 2002. Maxine Hicks

With Mr. Mason, Tanya Berezin and Rob Thirkield, Mr. Wilson founded the Circle Repertory Company, a highly regarded collective of actors, directors, playwrights and others known for its collaborative approach.

Established in 1969 on the Upper West Side as the Circle Theater Company, it later moved to the Sheridan Square Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The company ceased operations in 1996.

Besides producing work by Mr. Wilson, Circle Rep produced plays by Jules Feiffer, Sam Shepard, Larry Kramer and others. Actors associated with the company include William Hurt, Kathy Bates, Barnard Hughes, Cherry Jones and Cynthia Nixon.

Stylistically, the distinguishing hallmark of Mr. Wilson's work was his dialogue — authentic, gritty, often overlapping — be it the speech of his native Missouri or adopted New York. To audiences, his approach gave the experience of eavesdropping on real, bustling people in real, bustling time. (As a young playwright honing his craft, he later explained, he would set himself exercises like writing down the overheard speech of five people talking at once.)

Thematically, his work concerned dissolutions large and small: the rupture of societies, families and individual marriages; the loss of life, love, companionship and sanity.

His characters, drawn true to life if sometimes larger, tended toward the socially marginalized, perhaps no surprise for a man whose identity — Ozark, somewhat rootless, a child of a broken home, gay at a time when it was taboo to be gay — no doubt made him feel pushed to the margins of mainstream culture himself. (Mr. Wilson was noted for being one of the first mainstream playwrights to create central, meaningful gay and lesbian characters.)

Ragtag collections of prostitutes and pimps, drug addicts and sundry urban nighthawks, the people who populate his plays were unusual theatrical subjects in their day, but were no less sympathetic for that. In many respects, as he made clear in interviews, Mr. Wilson saw his work as the counterpart to the New Realism of post-1960 visual art, in which artists created works that were amalgams of images, often fragmentary, observed in the world around them and ripe for the taking.

As he also made clear, the subject matter of many of his plays was drawn from his own life.

Lanford Eugene Wilson was born in Lebanon on April 13, 1937; his parents divorced when he was a young child. He moved with his mother to Springfield, Mo., and, after she remarried a farmer, to Ozark, Mo.

After studying briefly at Southwest Missouri State College, Mr. Wilson moved to San Diego, where his father was living. Their reunion — not a happy one, though their relationship fared better in later years — became the basis of “Lemon Sky.”

That play, first performed in 1970 at the Studio Arena Theater in Buffalo, opened Off Broadway that year at the Playhouse Theater on West 48th Street, and was revived in 1985 at the Second Stage Theater. It was later adapted as a television movie, first broadcast in 1988 and starring Kevin Bacon as the youth who attempts to bond with his estranged father.

In San Diego, the young Mr. Wilson worked at a desultory job in an aircraft plant and took classes at what was then San Diego State College. It was there, in a writing class, that he discovered dialogue and determined to become a writer of short stories.

In the late 1950s, Mr. Wilson moved to Chicago, where he worked as a commercial artist in an advertising agency and took extension classes at the University of Chicago. He wrote a sheaf of short stories that were rejected by all the magazines to which he sent them, and made his first tentative stabs at writing plays.

Mr. Wilson settled in New York in 1962. There, as the reference work *Current Biography* wrote in 1979, he “saw and disliked every play on Broadway.”

He found the ersatz environment of Off Off Broadway, with its theater spaces shoehorned into coffeehouses and church basements, far more congenial. His first produced play, a one-act called “So Long at the Fair,” was staged at Caffe Cino, in the Village, in 1963. It concerned a young man, newly arrived in New York, and the young woman who hopes to seduce him.

Reviewing the play, *The Village Voice* praised the “exactness and inner logic” of the dialogue. Over the years to come, Mr. Wilson's facility for dialogue proved both a great strength and an occasional weakness: critics sometimes took him to task for neglecting other aspects of dramatic construction, like tight plotting, in favor of the rush of pure spoken language.

In 1965, Mr. Wilson attracted attention with “The Madness of Lady Bright,” also at Caffe Cino. Its protagonist, Leslie Bright, is a middle-aged gay man confronting a wistful past, a lonely present and an uncertain future.

He garnered still wider attention for his first full-length play, “Balm in Gilead,” also staged in 1965, at La MaMa. The play, about low-life characters converging in the New York nightscape, was so successful that Ellen Stewart, La MaMa’s founder, had to stand on the sidewalk each night and beseech an eager fire marshal not to close the theater, packed to capacity.

His first play to come to Broadway was “The Gingham Dog,” about the dissolution of an interracial marriage. It ran for just 19 performances in 1969.

Mr. Wilson was single at the time of his death. Survivors include two half-brothers, John and Jim, and a stepsister, Judy.

In an interview quoted in The Times in 2002, Mr. Wilson expounded on his realist, quasidocumentary approach: “I want people to see — and to read — my plays and to say: ‘This is what it was like living in that place at that time. People haven’t changed a damn bit. We can recognize everyone.’ ”

Correction: March 26, 2011

An obituary on Friday about the playwright Lanford Wilson misstated, in some copies, the day he died. It was Thursday, not Wednesday.

Correction: May 6, 2011

An obituary on March 25 about the playwright Lanford Wilson misstated the name of the publication in which Mr. Wilson was quoted discussing his early days in New York. It is Current Biography, not Contemporary Biography. A reader alerted The Times to the error on Thursday.

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.

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