

Obsession with characters make new play work

NEW YORK — Lanford Wilson's comedy "Talley's Folly," which opened on Broadway Wednesday night at the Brooks Atkinson Theater, originated when the playwright became obsessed with his characters in an earlier play.

He's already working on a third play about the Talley family, and thinking of a fourth and fifth. They live just outside his home town, Lebanon, Mo.

Though Wilson is a popular playwright whose works are frequently produced around the country, only once before has he been represented on Broadway.

"There was a Broadway production of 'Gingham Dog,' that's about 11 years ago already. It ran for a fast five nights," he said in an interview during rehearsals for "Talley's Folly."

The best known of "Lance" Wilson's plays are "The Hot I Baltimore," "The Mound Builders," "The Rimers of Eldritch," "Serenading Louie" and "5th of July."

All like "Talley's Folly," were first produced by the Off Broadway Circle Repertory Company, which Wilson and three colleagues founded in 1969.

"Talley's Folly" is a two-character, one act play set on a farm near Lebanon. (Wilson was born in Lebanon in 1937. He now lives in Sag Harbor, N.Y.)

It concerns the 1944 wooing of Sally Talley, a daughter of the house, by her future husband, Matt Friedman, in a decaying boathouse. The stars are Judd Hirsch and Trish Hawkins, both of them long associated with Circle Rep. The director is Marshall Mason, a co-founder of Circle Rep who has directed most of Wilson's plays.

The play is an outgrowth of Wilson's "5th of July" (1978) but set 33 years earlier.

"When I was working on the history of the Talley house for '5th of July,'" Wilson said, "I realized there were a lot of things going on. But it wasn't until I was nearly finished that I knew I was going to do another play."

Wilson says all his characters are based on people he's met, but disguised so much you'd never recognize them.

"5th of July" came from a couple of separate events," he said.

"I'd been wanting to write a you-may-go-home-again play for a long time. Then I was teaching a course at Southampton College and one of my students was a legless Vietnam veteran. He was taking every course he could — afraid to go back into life. He had been an English teacher, a good one. He told me that after he'd lost his legs he tried to take a class and found the students wouldn't look at him.

"At the same time, a friend and his wife were selling their home. I put the two ideas together for the play."

In "5th of July," Sally Talley is widowed Aunt Sally, who carries Matt's ashes everywhere she goes, looking for a place to deposit them.

The next play in the series already has a title, "The War in Lebanon," and a tentative opening date. But Wilson isn't sure which way the characters are going to take him.

"It's getting so complicated that it may not be ready on time," he said. "I assume it's going to be a comedy — unless it fools me. It's another Talley play, and shows what is going on in the main house at the same time that 'Talley's Folly' is taking place in the boathouse.

"But the plays have a way of creeping up on you. It may wind up in 1947 or even in the '50s."

A character in "The Mound Builders," which was filmed for PBS, also was based on people Wilson has known or heard of.

"She's half Tennessee Williams

and half a woman friend of his who had recently died. He told me about her while we were working on a TV production, and I said to myself, 'I'm going to use that character.'"

He said there have been few changes in the script of "Talley's Folly" since its first production at Circle Rep last May and later at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

"We've cut a few lines because a very nice moment was about to happen and the lines were in the way," Wilson said.

"But it was the first time I had the script ready in time — and pre-recorded. For once we have used my first draft, rather than the fourth or fifth."

"I wrote it for Hirsch and Trish, and never gave any thought of doing it on Broadway with anyone else. They're both a part of it. Of course, we got calls from producers saying things like, 'I'd like it for Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward' — or some other stars — but we never considered it."

"I've attended all the rehearsals except the first three or four. That's because Marshall starts off by improvising the characters, so the actors can have a strong relationship as a foundation."

"It makes me very nervous to see my characters not using my lines or my play. So I've learned over the years to wait till Marshall says, 'Now we're going to start blocking.'"

"The rehearsals are the greatest fun, because it's such a creative process. We might agree on changing a word or two, but a rehearsal is no time to rewrite a play."

Though the "Talley" plays have a common background and characters, Wilson had never thought much about any common theme to his plays until he read a thesis on the subject.

"This young man commented that all my plays were so different from each other they could have been written by different playwrights. I got mad at first, but then I realized that there is an overall theme to my work which I hadn't noticed before: they're all about destruction, people tearing the past apart."

"It stopped me dead in my tracks for a while, wondering whether it's worth saying, or whether it's basically what everybody else is saying."

While working on "The War in Lebanon," Wilson also is thinking about a rewrite of "The Mound Builders."

The Circle Rep has been invited to take it to an Italian international theater festival, and on re-reading it he became dissatisfied with its lack of a strong focus.

Meanwhile, he's on the board of the Circle Rep, where he is a resident playwright, is involved in deciding which plays will be produced, attending Friday night play readings, raising money for the company.

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Almanac

United Press International
Today is Friday, Feb. 22, the 53rd day of 1980 with 313 to follow.
The moon is in its first quarter.

The morning stars are Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.
The evening stars are Mercury and Venus.
Those born on this day are under the sign of Pisces.
George Washington was born Feb. 22, 1732.
On this date in history:

In 1819, Florida was ceded to the United States in a treaty with Spain.

In 1879, Franklin Woolworth opened his first "5-cent" store in Utica, N.Y. Sales for the first week averaged \$2.50 a day.

In 1972, President Nixon met with Communist leader Mao Tse-tung within hours after his arrival in Peking for an unprecedented visit to mainland China.

In 1973, Israeli fighter planes shot down a unarmed Libyan commercial airliner, killing 106 of the 113 people aboard.

A thought for the day: George Washington said, "The basis of our political system is the right of the people to make and to alter their constitutions of government."

Samaritan helps a traveler and gets left by the wayside

United Press International
GLENNVILLE, N.Y. — A Vermont man was treated for torn muscles Wednesday — the price he paid for learning one good turn doesn't necessarily deserve another.

Police reported Lawrence E. Wright of Hartford, Vt., stopped on Route 50 to assist a woman trying to change a flat tire on her car. Just as Wright put on the spare, the jack slipped and the car fell down on his

left side.
Instead of helping the good samaritan, the woman railed at Wright for letting the jack slip and not finishing the job.

Police said the woman then replaced the lug nuts, told Wright "the hospital is just down the road," and drove off. The injured man managed to get to his own car and drive to Ellis Hospital in Schenectady.

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Police chief choice opposed

United Press International
HOUSTON — Mayor Jim McConn Thursday nominated B.K. Johnson as police chief, a selection opposed by many minority and homosexual residents.

Several council members said they would vote against the mayor's choice, whose nomination requires consent of eight of the 15 council members, but McConn predicted he had the necessary votes for approval.

Johnson, 45, an assistant chief and a 26-year veteran of the Houston force, was chosen to replace Harry Caldwell, who resigned last week, effective Feb. 29.

"I think he's a sensitive person," McConn said at a news conference. "I think he'll be able to work with all groups in the city."

"I deny those charges of racism and sexism," Johnson said. "I feel like the people who would make these charges don't even know B.K. Johnson. I feel they will be satisfied."

Peace Justice Al Green charged Johnson "doesn't know what's going on in the heads of blacks" and said his selection as chief would "send Houston back to the '40s."

Councilman Lance Lalor said he would oppose the nomination and said there could be "no worse choice

than B.K. Johnson" whom he described as "overtly racist and sexist."

Much of the criticism of Johnson stemmed from remarks he made last November about the failure of blacks to reach the top levels of the Police Department.

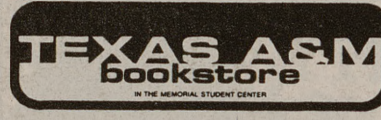
"I don't know what goes on in the mind of the black as far as the ability to study, the ability to know what he's supposed to be doing, the ability to take an exam and score high," Johnson said.

Councilman Ben Reyes also said he would vote against Johnson.
Gay Political Caucus President Steve Shiflett said he definitely opposed Johnson's nomination.

NOTICE:

Effective Feb. 25, 1980 the security lockers that are located in the entry area on both levels of the Texas A&M Bookstore will be cleaned out each day at 5:00 p.m.

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