

## An Interview with Lanford Wilson

### John C. Tibbetts

At the beginning of Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky*, the character of Alan comes downstage out of the darkness. "I've been trying to tell this story, to get it down, for a long time," he says to the audience, "--for a number of years, seven years at least--closer to ten." Alan's lament is the playwright's dilemma. He explains that the story has been told dozens of times to friends, each time with different starts and different endings. He adds that the characters often disrupt matters and go off on their own, wilfully, sometimes destructively. "They wouldn't have any part of what I wanted them to say. They sat down to coffee or some damn thing."

For thirty-four years, ever since Lanford Wilson's arrival in New York City in 1956 at the age of nineteen, he has fought and wrestled that stubborn, sometimes pliant, sometimes recalcitrant raw material of theatrical stuff. Now one of America's most successful and respected playwrights, he is turning his energies increasingly to that kind of theatrical trench warfare known as the "staged reading." He is in Kansas City at the moment visiting the Missouri Repertory Theater's Second Stage to direct a reading of Timothy Mason's new play, *Babylon Gardens*. Obviously, he identifies with this play--like *Lemon Sky* it is about a young man trying to cope with memories of a difficult relationship with his father. It will go through many hours of rehearsal (or "discovery" as he puts it) before facing three days' worth of paying audiences. Then it will go back to New York for a possible premiere. Ask Timothy Mason, who is also here, just how possible that premiere is, and he only shrugs. His play isn't finished yet. Lanford Wilson agrees.

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John Tibbetts writes regularly for *The Christian Science Monitor* and has produced arts commentaries and stories for CBS Television. His many articles have appeared in publications as diverse as *Opera News*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Musical America*, *Cinema Journal*, and the *Literature/Film Quarterly*. Among his book publications are a history of the interaction between Hollywood and Broadway, *The American Theatrical Film*, and *The Encyclopedia of the 20th Century* (for which he served as Editor for the entries on the arts).

"It's very strange," Wilson says. "You never know where a play comes from. You may have had the idea for five years; you still don't know where it came from or where it's going to hit you; or when you're going to actually sit down and write the darned thing. And when you *do* sit down to write, you may write something completely different."

His own *Lemon Sky*, to stay with that example for a moment, is a case in point. One early version was given a staged reading at the O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwright's Conference in 1968. In 1970 a different version came to Buffalo's Studio Arena Theater.

Then it moved to an Off Broadway theatre for a brief run later that May. It was revived after more changes fifteen years later at The Second Stage in New York in 1985. When it was printed in the May 1986 issue of *American Theatre*, it revealed still more changes.

"What drives me crazy is having to finally say--OK, you can print it. Because I keep wanting to tinker with it and fuss with it. And my publishers hate me, because they send me page proofs and I send them back with marginalia all over them and they say--Lanford, this costs a fortune to re-do. I just never--I always want to change things."

We are sitting in Room 119 of the Missouri Repertory Theater's Stage Two. The actor rehearsals before tomorrow's first public reading have been intense. Wilson's soft Missouri drawl belies a quick volatility that seems to prowl around, restless, even at this late hour on a wintry February evening.

"I love these readings," he is saying. "We have them at Circle Rep, too. We have a Friday reading every week of a new play. It's either one that a company writer is working on; or one that we found, the library department has found from outside from a new writer. Sometimes we invite the writer to come and hear it. And many times it's the first time he's heard his work read in public. It's not for an audience--just an audience of Circle Rep members, which is about two hundred."

Incidentally, these Circle Rep readings have become notorious for playwrights like John Patrick Shanley. In a recent interview during the release of his film, *Joe Versus the Volcano*, Shanley told me there comes a time in his work when he has to cut that umbilical cord. "I'll do a couple of readings, maybe two or three, but that long, developmental process Lanford has, well --God bless him--but I wouldn't want to do that! When it comes to playwrighting, they all have their own way of working. Lanford comes from Circle Repertory, which has a tradition of taking ten years to get it right. And I'd die! I'd say--chain me to a wall. I couldn't do it!"

Wilson is looking about at the tight circle of empty chairs. Dozens of coffee cups and ashtrays piled with mangled cigarette stubs are strewn about the table in front of us. Timothy Mason has joined in the conversation. By contrast to Wilson's thatched hair, furious eyebrows, and restless manner, Mason is tidy and self-contained.

"You find acute ears among the listeners who come to these readings, in New York, or here in Kansas City," he says. His Minnesota voice is a pleasant counterpoint to Wilson's. "People rediscover they have ears for the theatre. They get attuned to just the *sounds* of the readings very quickly."

Wilson laughs sharply, agreeably. "I sometimes find that the readings are more important than the subsequent productions. When you have a reading without all the trappings, without the stuffing, your mind has to work and you make the set and costumes and the changes. You end up becoming the director."

The Circle Rep first discovered Mason when his unsolicited manuscript for a play called *Levitation* appeared in the mail. Wilson became Mason's dramaturg and invited him to come to New York. Now Mason is a company playwright and has had three plays produced by the organization.

Wilson is satisfied that history is repeating itself. He himself is a product of regional theatres and noncommercial theatres.

"I was born in Lebanon, Missouri and graduated from high school in the town of Ozark, where I had moved to go to high school. My father had left a long time ago and my mother had remarried. But I got out of Missouri as soon as I could. I thought, I've got to get the hell out of here. And I left, went out to San Diego. My father, whom I hadn't heard from in thirteen years, said--why don't you come out to San Diego? And I split as quick as I could. And then we didn't get along at all well. So I went to see some friends of mine in Chicago and fell in love with Chicago. I always thought I was going to be a painter. I thought I was going to do that. I was the best artist at Ozark High School. There were ten people in the art department and I was the best one. And then I went to San Diego State and I wasn't the best one anymore. But still I thought I was going to be a painter. Actually, I was interested in advertising and advertising illustration, editorial illustration--or even produce illustration. My writing was just an avocation then. Sometimes I would write stories and send them off and I got a collection of rejection slips from the best magazines in the country. One day in Chicago I was working in an ad agency and started a new story. I said, you know what?--this doesn't sound like a story, this sounds like a *play!* I got halfway down the page, no more than that, and said--I'm a playwright. It was just as clear as day. I had an actual talent for writing dialogue and no talent at all for writing narrative. Writing down the way people spoke in a room was suddenly incredibly exciting. It was one of those life decisions where you know immediately--you're never going to get to the bottom of this thing. And what more could you want than something that you're never going to--that's never going to satisfy you completely? And I just saw this as an enormous, great challenge that was going to be worth banging away at for the rest of my life."

At that time in the mid-fifties Chicago was primarily a stop for touring plays. Wilson saw *Night of the Iguana* with Bette Davis before it opened on

Broadway. He saw Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* with Joan Littlewood. "I think I tried to write my version of *The Hostage* for the next five years."

An erstwhile playwright now, Wilson came to New York in 1956. Disgusted at Broadway, he turned to a number of new, small theaters. The movement we now call "Off-Off Broadway" was just beginning.

"I found the Caffe Cino in New York. That was the very beginning of 'Off-Off Broadway.' They hadn't even named it yet. I had the first play that I wrote in New York done within three months of my arrival. I've since learned that's not the typical story. . . . There was the Judson Church, the Cafe La Mama, and of course the Caffe Cino. And there were about 15 playwrights in New York City that worked there. And that's all. Now, there are about 40,000, it seems! It was a great apprenticeship, but we didn't know it. We just were working and you couldn't have more than a half-hour play because the audiences' butts couldn't stand to sit on the edge of a milk carton for more than a half hour! Also, the Caffe Cino was so hot you couldn't keep it closed, locked from the street for more than thirty minutes."

He pauses to light another cigarette. There's a slight clatter behind us as two stagehands begin packing away the scattered chairs. We talk about his founding of the Circle Repertory Company in 1968.

"I had had no real success. I got sort of minor awards and minor grants from people because, as I said, there weren't many of us. But I didn't have any real success or any real recognition until *The Hot L Baltimore* in 1973, I don't believe. That was for Circle Rep. I had also written *Rimers of Eldritch* and *Balm in Gilead*. But you understand, they only ran for a week. So you couldn't get--there isn't much satisfaction in something running a week! Maybe that's why you have to be so prolific--the plays were on such a short time you had to write something very quick to get something back on!

"I was one of the founders of Circle Rep. At Off-Off Broadway we all worked together. There was sort of a loose collective of writers and designers and actors and directors. The Caffe Cino had folded and there was no place for us to go. So we started our own theatre to be as much like the Caffe Cino as possible. Except we were a little more professional than that. So we started up above a McCann shoestore on Broadway--but about 70 blocks north of the Broadway anyone's heard of. After about four or five years we moved to a professional house that used to be called Sheridan Square Playhouse; and now it's Circle Repertory Company. We're in Greenwich Village at 7th Avenue South and West 4th Street at one of the great old intersections in the Village. We're in our 21st or 22nd year now. It's amazing--it sure doesn't seem like it."

All of Wilson's subsequent major works premiered there--besides *The Hot L Baltimore*, there have been *The Mound Builders* (1975), *Serenading Louie* (1976), *Angels Fall* (1982), and the "Talley Trilogy" (*5th of July*, *Talley's Folly*, and *Talley and Son*). Wilson won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980 for *Talley's Folly*. Many other productions and many newcomers got their start at Circle Rep.

"Let's see, there was *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder*--that started there. There was a play that toured all over the country, called *Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein, Gertrude Stein*. We did the first New York production of Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending*. John Malkovich came to us from Steppenwolf in Chicago. William Hurt came from Juilliard to us. Christopher Reeve--just at the time he was auditioning for *Superman* in London. Swoozie Kurtz, Richard Thomas. We found Timothy Mason in our 'slush-pile.'"

Mason explains he had sent *Levitation* to Circle Rep. "I feel fortunate that Circle Rep opened that envelope and responded to that first play I sent out. Without Circle Rep, I would be hopeless, without a theatrical home--a playwright all alone in his room. With a theatrical home, I've got constant feedback, a venue to read embryonic scripts. Bill Hurt did a reading in New York and we knew the thing needed more work. So here we are."

This theatrical midwifery takes its toll, however. If a living income is difficult enough in the commercial theatre, it's all but impossible in the birthing rooms of noncommercial theatre.

"Most of the theatre work we do ends up being *pro bono*," Wilson says. "Serious plays haven't made money for authors on Broadway for years. Since I've come to New York there's not been more than a few plays on Broadway that made the author anything to speak of at all. There's a new contract now where we get a minimum of \$1,000 a week, which is very good, while a play is running on Broadway. But you really have to survive from other sources. My friend Tim here types for the National Kidney Foundation. I just finished roughing out a screenplay for *Burn This*. But it was rejected out of hand. It would make a terrific movie. You hope it can get done, like *Driving Miss Daisy*, which is very close to the original work. Then, they just pour money onto you until you say, stop, that's enough!" He laughs out loud. "I've had several plays on Broadway. And I go back and forth all the time about how I feel about the Broadway audience. I really have a feeling that I'm happier Off-Broadway and I'm happier in the regional theatres. Because, whatever the Broadway audience is going for, I'm not really quite sure that I'm pleasing them. It's very strange, when you're writing a play, you really don't care who you offend or what you say. You just have to say it one way or the other and it comes out and you work very hard to keep it as true to your subject as you possibly can. And you really say, I do not care who this offends. And then the play gets on and the very first person who gets up and walks, you say--My God, why is he leaving? Don't tell me he didn't like it! I'm so upset when somebody leaves. And you've put on the play with no compromises whatever and then someone is offended and leaves and you say--Lord, no, I hope I didn't offend that person! But that's just my old 'wanting-to-be-liked' nonsense. Fortunately, I don't have that when I write. You can't write a play to be liked."

We exchange anecdotes about authors driven to write, by that compulsion that twitches fingers toward the pen and paper, or the typewriter, or the pad of paper. Wilson shakes his head ruefully.

"Tennessee Williams used to write at night because he took change in the subway. He sold tokens in the subway. He felt very protected in the booth. He had the night shift. And he'd sit there and write on the pad. I wrote *The Madness of Lady Bright* on the Reservation typewriter at the Americana Hotel in New York. I was the Night Reservation person and nobody ever made reservations at night. So, it was a very good occupation for a writer!"

The chairs have all been folded away by now. (Wilson and Mason look askance, as if their own will be whisked away from under them. I decide no better metaphor for life in the theatre could be found. There is time for a last question or two.) I ask how the Circle Rep in New York continues to encourage new playwrights and plays.

"Oh, we have our 'literary department,'" drawls Wilson, puffing away at a last cigarette. "We have readers, they read unsolicited scripts. We're the only theatre in the country, I believe, that reads unsolicited scripts. And comments on them. From anyone. They don't even have to be submitted by an agent or anything anymore. And then we come to places like the Missouri Rep. We have an excellent cast here for the reading of *Babylon Gardens*. Some real discoveries. Missouri Rep called us, inviting us to come out here --and we said, would we ever! Plays have to have a long development process. And here things are completely--completely blind. We have no idea what the reception will be, what we've got. They will tell us."

He looks around the room, those bristling brows surmounting a sudden puff of smoke. "It's like my work on the 'Talley' trilogy, you know? You don't know what's going to come out of it all. You have to learn so much about the characters and that takes time. You have to do so much research and so much of a--forgive this word--back story. You become interested in the background, like I did with the Talleys. And so--when I was working on *5th of July* I had to get the story of Matt and Sally right. And I found that and thought, boy, that would be a really good story! So I wondered while writing *Talley's Folly* just what was happening up on the hill in the main house during the dialogue at the Folly. I said, boy, I sure would like to know that. And then I wanted to know about the guy that had built that house. So out comes *Talley and Son*. Working on something, it generates in your mind the story of what happens earlier. There are a lot of plays that go *backwards* like that.

"It's those characters. They need time to live out a life and learn to talk to you. They really do. They really do pester and hound you. They yell--but it's great, a healthy thing when they do. When they're silent is when you start worrying!"

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