The American Century Theater
presents

SERENADING LOUIE

by
Lanford Wilson

Audience Guide

Written and compiled by Jack Marshall

July 23–August 21, 2010
Theatre II, Gunston Arts Center

Theater you can afford to see—
plays you can't afford to miss!

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called "the American Century."

The company's mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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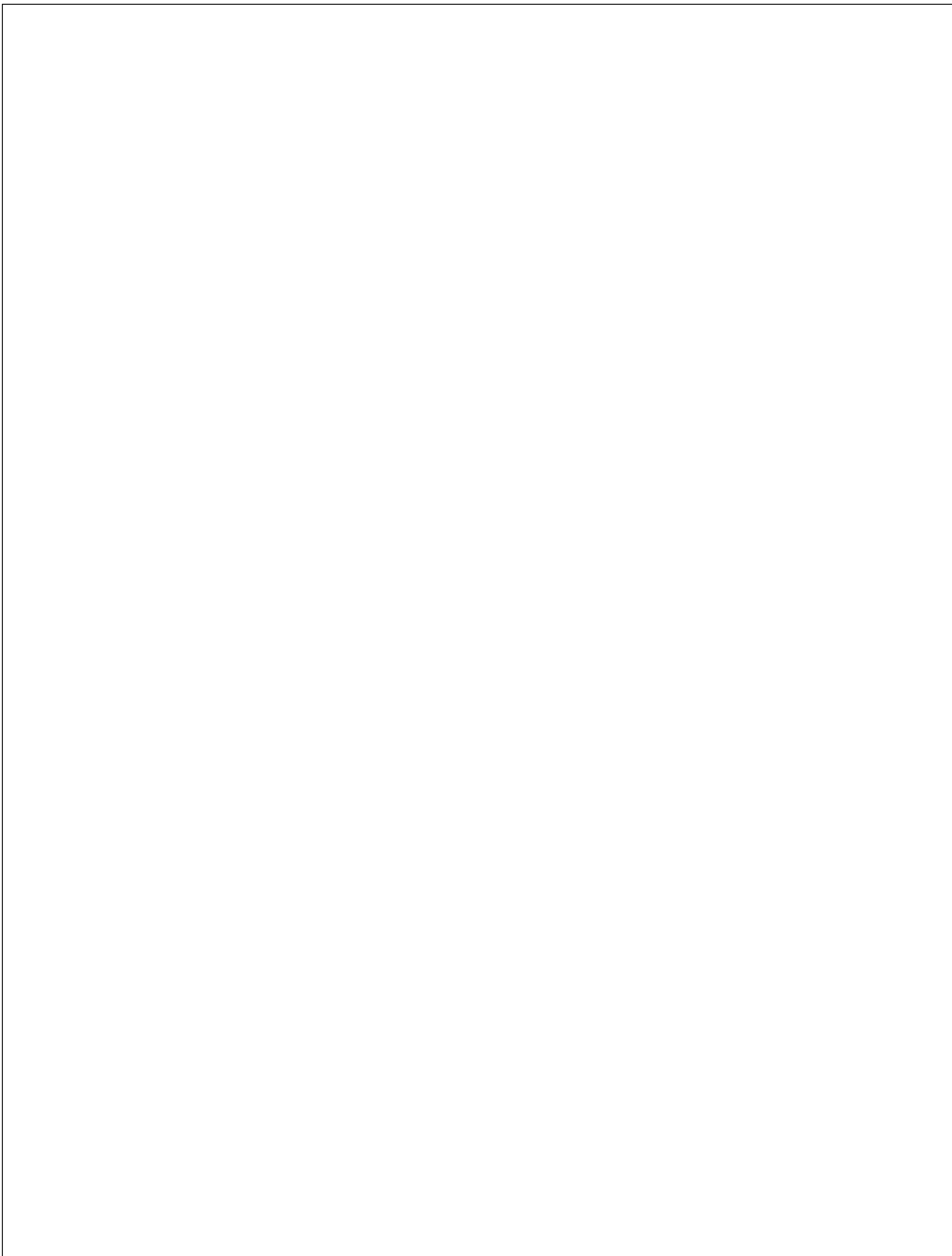

Who Is Louie?

—Jack Marshall

If you didn't graduate from Yale, the odds are that the title *Serenading Louie* means nothing to you. The title appears in the second stanza of the song, which is the traditional closing number of the Whiffenpoofs, an *a cappella* harmony singing group at Yale University, much parodied (as in the comedy *Trading Places*) and much imitated (as by the sound-alike Harvard College student group, the Crocadilloes). The song, whose author and composer are often cited as "Anonymous," was actually based on a tune written by Tod Galloway (or, some sources say, Harvard grad Guy H. Scull), with lyrics by Yalie Meade Minnigerode. It was published in sheet music form in 1909 (the year the Whiffenpoofs were founded) and became a hit for crooner Rudy Vallee (Yale, Class of 1927) in 1927 and again in 1947 for *uber*-crooner Bing Crosby. It was also recorded by Elvis Presley, Count Basie, Perry Como, the Statler Brothers, and many others.

"Mory's" refers to Mory's Temple Bar in New Haven, Connecticut, and "Louie" to a former owner of Mory's, Louis Linder. The chorus is a parody of the poem "Gentlemen Rankers" by Rudyard Kipling.

The song has turned up in many pieces of American culture and pop culture, especially in war movies. It was sung in the Air Force film *Winged Victory* in 1944, for example. It was featured in the opening sequence of the World War II TV series *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, and the famous chorus was heard in the movie *12 O'Clock High*, starring Gregory Peck. More recently, the first verse was heard under the action in various parts of the CIA thriller *The Good Shepherd*, which was produced by Guy McElwaine, younger brother of TACT Resident Playwright Bob McElwaine, who died earlier this year. On the other end of the spectrum, the song was warbled by a herd of sheep on *The Muppet Show*.

Here are the lyrics:

From the tables down at Mory's,
To the place where Louie dwells,
And the dear, old Temple Bar we love so well,
Sing the Whiffenpoofs assembled,
With their glasses raised on high!
And the magic of their singing, casts a spell.

Yes the magic of their singing,
Of the songs we love so well:
"Shall I Wasting" and "Mavourneen" and the rest!
We will serenade our Louie,
Till health and voices fail,
And we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest.

We are poor little lambs
Who have lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
We are little black sheep
Who have gone astray!
Baa! Baa! Baa!

Gentleman songsters, off on a spree,
Doomed from here to eternity.
Lord! Have mercy on such as we,
Baa! Baa! Baa!

The Playwright: Lanford Wilson

—Jack Marshall

Lanford Wilson is a prolific American playwright, much admired by critics and bankable on Broadway, who has written the requisite number of famous and successful plays (at least four: *Talley's Folly, The Fifth of July, Burn This!,* and his first hit, *Hot L Baltimore*) to bolster his equally accomplished but less familiar ones (*The Rimers of Eldritch, Balm in Gilead*, and many more) and earn him a place with the all-time greats of the American Theater. Despite this, Wilson has never achieved the kind of celebrity and public familiarity that followed the last generation of great playwrights, like Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller, or even Neil Simon. Shown a photograph of Wilson, even the most sophisticated theatergoers would be puzzled about whose face it was. We don't have that many great playwrights these days, but still Wilson manages to stay nearly invisible.

Perhaps part of the problem is that he had the bad luck to share the Wilson surname with a contemporary, also a great playwright, who has been both more outspoken and a little bit more successful. That would be African-American playwright August Wilson, eight years Lanford's junior but five years dead, who won *two* Pulitzer Prizes for Drama to Lanford Wilson's one (for *Talley's Folly*), and whose ten-play "Pittsburgh Cycle," dramatizing the Black experience in America, is one of the most impressive playwriting achievements of any native writer. But Lanford Wilson doesn't have to take a back seat to anyone, even August.

"What Lanford Wilson does is write beautiful plays," writes critic and essayist Thomas Keith. He is undeniably right. Wilson's lack of celebrity proportional to his accomplishments is more likely the product of his own relentless and sincere modesty. Comparisons to legendary playwrights embarrass him. He is commonly called a contemporary Tennessee Williams, for example, and he rejects the notion.

"I don't compare myself to Tennessee Williams, no, thank you," he told an interviewer in 1984. "We're talking Tennessee Williams. He's great, and I'm not."

Most theatergoers familiar with Lanford Wilson's work disagree.

Wilson was born on April 13, 1937, in Lebanon, Missouri. Family journeys took him to the Ozarks and San Diego, until he finally reached the University of Chicago in 1959, where he enrolled in his first playwriting class. Upon graduation, he moved to New York City.

"I left Chicago because there was no theatre, which is hard to believe," Wilson told an interviewer years later. "Of course, you had touring companies, but nothing like the abundance and level of professionalism that exists in Chicago today. So playwrights really only could go to New York. I found that the quality of my work improved immensely in New York because I was in this incubator of creativity."

The incubator soon got him involved with a group of theatrical artists at the Café Cino, a tiny coffeehouse Off-Off-Broadway (read: semiprofessional theater) that presented edgy, avant garde works. Wilson became active as a playwright, director, actor, and designer, and got his first play, *So Long at the Fair*, produced there in 1963. "All playwrights have to do is hang around a theatre long enough until someone reads their script," he tells young playwrights. "A good strategy is to work at a theatre, you know, like do things around the office. Don't tell them you're a writer. Then, sooner or later, someone will ask you what you do, and you hand them a script."

Another of Wilson's scripts produced at the café was a one-act entitled *Home Free* (1964), about the relationship of two incestuous siblings. During the run of *Home Free*, Wilson met a young director named Marshall W. Mason. The two initially clashed when Mason criticized Wilson's rewrite of *Home Free*, but when Wilson gave Mason a copy of his latest play, *Balm in Gilead* (1965), a massive, 56-character piece employing simultaneous scenes and overlapping dialogue, a creative partnership was forged. Several months later, *Balm in Gilead* opened under the direction of Mason at the Café La Mama, beginning a long and profitable collaboration between the two young artists.

In 1969, Wilson and Mason cofounded Circle Repertory Company. Its production of Wilson's *Hot L Baltimore* (1973), the story of a ragtag group of drifters, prostitutes, and aging residents in an old, run-down hotel, was directed by Mason and was a sensation, running for 1,100 performances (an Off-Broadway record for a non-musical) and eventually was transferred to

Broadway. It won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and the Obie Award, and established Wilson as a major playwright.

Wilson and Mason continued their successful collaboration, which included *The Mound Builders* (1975)—a play that Wilson has identified as one of his own favorites—in which an archaeological dig sets the stage for a fascinating meditation on a university scientist's past and present; *Serenading Louie* (1970), about two young suburban couples confronting disillusionment at the heart of their marriages; *Angels Fall* (1982), where strangers come together in a small, remote, mission church in New Mexico to face their own mortality in the wake of a possible nuclear accident, and *Talley's Folly* (1979), perhaps Wilson's most celebrated play, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

Wilson's choice of themes has been compared not only to those of Tennessee Williams, but also William Inge (*Bus Stop, Picnic*) and Lillian Hellman (*Watch on the Rhine, The Little Foxes, The Children's Hour*). He explores alienation, loneliness, and crumbling illusions, often with an autobiographical twist, always with a keen sensitivity to the anxiety of the times. But it is Tennessee Williams that Wilson most often hears about as his muse, and with good reason.

After all, Wilson has said that his interest in theater began in high school, where he played Tom in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. His autobiographical "memory play," *Lemon Sky,* which relates his split with his father upon revealing that he was gay, has roots in *The Glass Menagerie.* Wilson "collaborated" with Williams when he wrote the libretto for the opera version of *Summer and Smoke* and worked directly with Williams on the idea for the teleplay, *The Migrants*. Both are openly gay American playwrights who come from the South.

The similarity breaks down, however, when one examines the two playwrights' characters. Keith writes, "Where Williams's characters can be recognized variously as desperate, charming, sensual, hysterical, benevolent, fantastic, or violent, Wilson's characters are more likely to be identified as tough, passionate, no nonsense, intelligent, sarcastic, blunt, or understated. In its directness and tone, Wilson's literary vocabulary is closer to Walt Whitman's than to Williams's. Wilson shares with Williams a gut

compassion for the outsiders of life; their empathy grasps the imperfections that connect us."

And while Williams is identified permanently with the South, Lanford Wilson, as Jackie Demaline wrote in a profile for *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, "is a poet of many places and, very often, lost souls. He writes about New York artists and addicts. He finds his way to a remote mission in New Mexico to consider nuclear annihilation. He sees Vietnam veterans abandoned to a forest of Redwoods. He also writes about America's heartland. Often."

"What I really am thankful for is that I was born in the country—I was on an Ozark farm milking cows—then grew up in a midsized city," Wilson says, explaining the sources of his perspective. "I worked my way through high school at a restaurant in St. Louis and learned all sorts of things. The maitre d' made me eat a Greek olive every day until I wouldn't spit it out. Then I went to California and worked building airplanes, then to Chicago, then New York. It was a great apprenticeship. At least I know where butter comes from."

Now 73 years old, Wilson is being showered with revivals and lifetime achievement awards, which bore and embarrass him. He learned Russian so he could translate the plays of one of his favorite writers (and, many believe, a great influence on his own use of language), Anton Chekhov, but he hasn't written a new play of his own since 2002. "I'm walking around in a funk because I don't have anything to say and I don' have an idea," he complained that year, "which is what always happens before I have an idea." He hasn't had it yet, but even if Lanford Wilson doesn't have another inspiration, his is a career to stand with the very best of U.S. playwrights.

Preceding *Louie:* The Unsettling Sixties

Serenading Louie is in great measure about dashed expectations, fraying ideals, disappointment, and fear of the future. It is no coincidence the play premiered in 1970, for these themes were not only on everyone's mind (at least those minds over 30 years old and not addled by LSD), but also gnawing at their souls.

The nation had just completed three culture-shattering years—1967, 1968 and 1969—that had deconstructed the values and bedrock convictions of the fifties and left the middle class feeling like strangers, aliens, or even enemies in their own nation and homes.

Here's some of what preceded *Serenading Louie*:

- The cities were powder kegs of racial tension. There were riots in Detroit, Cleveland, Boston, Washington DC, and Newark.
- The Vietnam War was dividing the country.
- Youth were in open revolt against established standards of taste, decorum, music, morality, legal conduct, and sex.
- Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther had been assassinated.
- The youth- and peace-driven presidential candidacy of Senator Gene McCarthy had collapsed in Democratic National Convention power politics. Chicago's streets were full of rioting kids and club-swinging police. Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley nearly came to blows on live national TV.
- Dwight Eisenhower, symbol of the placid fifties, died (in 1969).
- Women had begun wearing trousers in public.
- Richard Nixon was elected President.
- Harvard College was shut down after student activists seized the administration building.
- Thurgood Marshall became the first black Justice on the Supreme Court.

- An American soldier in Vietnam, William Calley, massacred women and children in a small village.
- Judy Garland died of a drug overdose.
- Senator Ted Kennedy, looked upon to take up the fallen banner of his two martyred brothers to lead the nation back to idealism and justice, drunkenly drove a car into a pond after a party and left a young woman, not his wife, to drown.
- The Soviet Union began cracking down on nascent freedom and dissent, crushing a flowering of a kinder, gentler Communism in Czechoslovakia.
- The Manson Family slaughtered Sharon Tate, her unborn child, and other guests at Tate's Beverly Hills estate.

Things were changing quickly, seemingly spinning out of control. The soothing, wistful harmonies and gentle nostalgia of "The Whiffenpoof Song" were being drowned out and rendered irrelevant by the hard rock strains of The Doors and The Grateful Dead. The future was uncertain and frightening, and the promise of just a few years earlier seemed far, far away.

Perhaps this sounds familiar . . . .

Critical Reactions to *Serenading Louie*

Reminiscence, said a wise woman, is masochistic: if you remember happiness, you're sad that it's gone, and, if you remember unhappiness, you feel bad all over again. The two couples in *Serenading Louie* haven't learned this yet. In their early thirties, feeling that the best of life is over, they retreat into memory, pawing through scraps of broken mirror from their bright college years. When you do this too long, and you do it in company, it's inevitable that a slip will bring blood . . . . Alex, a successful lawyer, is a rising star in politics, and Carl, a property developer, is making money hand over fist. Their respective wives, however, are obviously lost. Gaby, comfortable only in company, speaks to her husband in the halting, broken sentences of a woman terrified of rage or revelation: "I didn't realize . . . Have you read this? It isn't . . . well, I don't know what it isn't." Mary has the brisk, smooth confidence of old money, but she spends her life in motion and her afternoons with a lover who is Carl's employee. These Chicago couples lead lives so alike that one set is used for their two homes.

—Rhoda Koenig, on the 2010 British Premiere

. . . The skilled Lanford Wilson tirelessly chronicled a certain patch of the underbelly of America as it shifted from blue- to white-collar in the 1960s/70s, a time of Eames chairs, infidelities, and blue smoke and white goods. It could seem anachronistic, seeing it now, were we not so recently comfortable with the milieu thanks to *Mad Men, Life on Mars*, etc.—and he is, after all, telling a universal story.

—Euan Fergusen, *The Observer*, February 21, 2010

. . . Lanford Wilson's *Serenading Louie* is another play about marriage and adultery in the suburban upper middle class. Mr. Wilson's characters—two couples in their mid-30s, all longtime pals from Northwestern University days—are caught up in the usual cycle of betrayals, guilt, and angry recriminations. Much of the play takes place at that late hour when husbands and wives, having had too much drink or too little sleep, make war, not love.

Yet Mr. Wilson digs well beneath the surface of this familiar domestic battleground. Though his setting is an elegant home in the *Ordinary People* country north of Chicago, a character isn't wrong to describe this suburban terrain as a "wilderness." Like the people in Mr. Wilson's *Fifth of July* or *Angels Fall*—who inhabit rural outposts—those of *Louie* are quintessential modern American drifters, desperate to connect to anything that might give their lives meaning. If they can't connect to one another, then they'll rummage through the past or peer into the future, searching for ideals or for some notion of community that might fill the desolate vacuum of the present.

Serenading Louie—the title comes from "The Whiffenpoof Song"—was last seen (though not by me) at the Circle Repertory Company in 1976. The author has revised the text for the current revival . . . . [His characters are] superachievers who came of age in the 1950s and who lose their bearings in the 1960s . . . . Mr. Wilson's principal theatrical device is the use of a single set to represent the two couples' separate, neighboring homes. Even as the characters occupy the same physical space, the emotional lives in view hardly intersect at all.

Indeed, every connection is missed. Alex is a successful lawyer on the verge of a political career; unlike the others, he cares about the idealistic social credos of his time and is not threatened by a new generation of activist students. But his wife, Gaby, wants something else—and, until the end, she is so incapable of articulating her desires that she speaks almost entirely in unfinished sentences. Nor is the couple sexually in sync. Alex finds Gaby desirable only when he's out with her in public; once in the bedroom, he finds that his wife's lovemaking leaves him feeling "gelded."

The others fare no better. Carl, once a star Big Ten quarterback, can no longer find satisfaction in pursuing a high-powered entrepreneurial career and neither can he understand his buddy's pursuit of civic reform. Carl's wife, Mary, once a homecoming queen, is so lost that she spends most of her time aimlessly "running all over" to avoid her marriage. She wonders if she shouldn't admire her mother, a woman who sustains herself in Newport "without interests or friends."

As the play goes on, Mr. Wilson expands these crises rather than resolving them, finally to push each character into a solitary corner of the shared living

room. Alex decides that love is just “a neurosis” that two people “agree to share”—and we eventually realize that his commitment to public life is an escape from his inability to commit to a private one. The characters’ retreats into the happier past only leave them more disoriented. Remembering her fond feelings for Carl during their undergraduate courtship, Mary comes up short all around: “I don’t think I loved him then. But I loved him then now.”

“There’s got to be a way of giving each other what we want,” says Alex—but to find those ways, one must look to Mr. Wilson’s later work. Here the only hope is Alex’s wish that the first half of his life has been “just a dry run” for the “real life” yet to come. *Serenading Louie* can be as harrowing as quicksand . . . . The warmer breezes come from the author’s unfailing compassion.”

—Frank Rich, *New York Times* critic,
on the play’s 1984 Broadway revival

Lanford Wilson: I Hear America Talking

—Don Shewey (*Rolling Stone*, 6/22/82)[*]

Lanford Wilson works hard. The first time we meet, the playwright is taking a coffee break from writing. Unshaven, hyper, studiedly haggard—cheerfully haggard—he jangles down the hallway at the Circle Repertory Company, the off-Broadway theater he helped found in 1969, and pops into the green room, where actors congregate while waiting for rehearsals or classes or auditions to begin. He jokes with a couple of actors, greets visitors, shakes some Cremora into his styrofoam cup, and then heads back to his desk. Not a desk, actually—it's sort of a bare place where he's shoved aside some scripts and things on a long table in the small, cluttered office he shares with two women who are administrators for Circle Rep. "This is my spot," he says, slapping the surface in front of his paper-loaded typewriter. Here in the middle of ringing telephones, shuffling papers, and human traffic is where Wilson performs what back in his native Midwestern farm country might be called his "writing chores."

At 45, Lanford Wilson has written something like three dozen plays. They range from a monologue about a man who comes home to an empty house, to a thirty-four-character drama about junkies and streetwalkers, to a trilogy spanning five generations of an American family. His first play, a one-act called *Home Free*, about an incestuous young brother and sister, opened in Greenwich Village in 1964 at the minuscule Caffe Cino, the legendary, now nonexistent coffeehouse. His latest, the opus he's struggling to finish amid the bustle of Circle Rep's business as usual, was scheduled to premiere at the New World Festival in Miami last month. Set in a Catholic mission in New Mexico where an art history professor, a professional tennis player, and sundry other travelers wait out a brush with nuclear disaster, this new play is one of three commissioned for the festival in Florida; the other playwrights offering new works are Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. If Lanford Wilson hasn't already established himself as their heir, this rendezvous in the Everglades ought to do the trick..

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[*] *Thanks to* Rolling Stone *and Don Shewey (www.donshewey.com) for permission to include this essay. Please do not copy or distribute.*

If he gets the damn thing done. Playwrights aren't accustomed to having deadlines, and now, three months before the opening, the play is only half-finished. "It's interesting how it came about," says Wilson. "I didn't know what I was going to do, and I was starting to panic." He tilts back in his chair and props a Pro-Ked up on his, ah, spot. Lean and boyish, he's dressed in a blue work shirt, a green sweater and jeans, and his dull-brown hair, streaked with steely silver, tends to flop down over his forehead. "I have a new apartment," he says, "and I went down the block to check out the bars in the neighborhood. I went into one, nothing happening, and I saw behind the bar they had these two little postcards of barren, why-would-anyone-want-to-take-a-picture-of-that landscape. I thought—New Mexico, Colorado, Utah—the bartender is obviously on vacation and sent back these postcards.

"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. I don't know how it all ends; I'm letting them tell me. It's wonderful to write like that, just free-fall." Even half done, the play seems to touch on several of the hottest topics of the day: religion, tennis, nuclear power. Is this intentional? Wilson shrugs. "I write what's in the air."

More than most of his peers, Lanford Wilson has his ear cocked to the voice of the American people. As a writer, he doesn't have the mad, myth-making magic of Sam Shepard or the penetrating zaniness of John Guare. But Wilson—born and bred among Ozark hillbillies, schooled in San Diego and Chicago, irresistibly drawn to the bright lights of New York—somehow manages to straddle middle America and midtown Manhattan, small-town simplicity and big-city sophistication, working-class virtues and idle-rich vices, the far out and the far right.

Mr. Middle-of-the-Road? Maybe. You could also call him Mr. Zeitgeist. At a time when the family as an institution is under attack in life and fiction, Wilson's plays often portray people finding ways to regroup according to need rather than habit: Wilson focuses on preserving—conserving—what's good about the past for use in the future. In the regional-theater environment of Circle Rep, Wilson has had the freedom to refine a style of playwriting sometimes labeled "lyric realism."

"It's not something Lanford invented, but it is something he happens to do awfully well," says Marshall Mason, the Texas-born artistic director of Circle Rep. "It's a kind of realism that I feel is the voice of the native American theater, but it is realism that is elevated in its language. It takes the language people speak and makes it more musical."

Mason met Wilson in 1965, when he himself was just out of Northwestern University, and he has since directed most of Wilson's plays. "We did a few of his little plays at Circle, but he wasn't around much for the first couple of years," Mason recalls. "The real turning point came when one of our actresses, Conchata Ferrell, wanted to improve her range and decided to revive one of Lanford's one-acts called *Ludlow Fair*. For the other character, I suggested a young woman named Trish Hawkins, who had been in one of our workshops. Lanford absolutely flipped over Trish. She was the best actress he'd ever seen in his life. One night he and I were working real late building new seating units, and this song came on the radio, 'The City of New Orleans.' And he said, 'Oh, there's that song about the railroad; I'm going to write a play about the railroads, and I'm gonna use Trish and Chatty,' and on and on—he was just waxing eloquent. That was in the fall, and by Christmas he had written *The Hot L Baltimore*. I think that's when he decided to make this his home and write for the company."

Mason pauses, suddenly remembering a minor detail he left out. "Then *Hot L* was an enormous success and changed all of our lives. Dramatically."

Lanford Wilson has been working in the garden, a quarter-acre plot in the backyard of his two-story wood-frame house in the affluent Long Island community of Sag Harbor—the house that *Hot L Baltimore* built. Actually, it was built in 1845, and Wilson earned the $5,000 down payment from his libretto for Lee Hoiby's opera based on Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*. But it wasn't until the three-year run of *Hot L*—an essentially plotless but moving and funny study of a dozen lonely misfits set in the lobby of a once-elegant hotel scheduled for demolition—that he made enough money to start restoring the place to its former glory.

Though the grounds and garden are still being renovated, the upstairs is a different story, the "after" image in this *House and Garden* make-over: a sparsely furnished but homey bedroom, a guest room, and a study. Wilson washes up, and we settle down to talk in the study, a huge, airy room lined with bookshelves and windows and dominated by a working floor-to-ceiling

fireplace. The desk shows signs of recent industry (no fewer than three typewriters in sight), and the walls are covered with framed photos and posters from productions of his plays.

"I was always very excited by theater," says Wilson, who was born in rural Missouri and moved to Springfield at the age of five with his just-divorced mother. "Growing up, I had no idea plays were written, for some reason. I started out writing stories, and then suddenly I realized something I was writing was a play. I thought, I don't know how to write a play. I don't even know what a play is. So I went to the downtown center of the University of Chicago, to the 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."

Soon, he moved to New York and took a room in a fleabag hotel on the Upper West Side, haunting all-night coffee shops and eavesdropping on the hookers and druggies. "I was so excited by the sound of what was around me, those incredibly vibrant though maybe burned-out lives banging against each other. I would sit meekly in the corner and write down everything that was said." His notes turned into *Balm in Gilead*, which was a sensation when Marshall Mason directed it at Cafe La Mama in 1965 with dozens of actors playing faggots, dykes, junkies, hustlers, and deadbeats at an all-night cafe. The musically notated, overlapping conversations sounded like everyone talking at once, a favorite Wilson device: in confusion, verisimilitude. "I was impatient with you-talk-then-I'll-talk-then-you-talk-then-I'll-talk. So many people around me talk at the same time, they're all yelling and screaming, saying, 'No, no, no, me, me, me.' I was attracted to the idea of putting that onstage."

Wilson gets up to adjust the thermostat. He's not extremely comfortable sitting and talking for long periods of time; he fidgets a lot. He lights a cigarette, puts on his sweater, turns up the thermostat, takes off the sweater, stubs out the cigarette in a seashell ashtray. It's not that he's jittery or nervous. It's just that, left alone, he'd probably be writing or typing, pruning or digging. You know, working.

"The New York sound was so overwhelming," he continues. "I couldn't write fast enough. After a while I thought, here I am, this hillbilly person writing all these New York plays. What am I doing? The sound of Missouri" —he pronounces it Ma-*zur*-ah—"I know that better than I know anything."

So he took the word-collage technique he'd been developing, applied it to the language he grew up with and concocted *This Is the Rill Speaking*, an idyllic play for rural voices, a down-home *Under Milkwood*. Then he turned around and wrote the underbelly of that play, *The Rimers of Eldritch*, an eerie, elliptical drama about small-town intolerance. Along with a few one-act character studies (most notably *The Madness of Lady Bright*, the last gasp of a lonely, aging homosexual), these are the plays with which Lanford Wilson first earned success as a playwright.

Of course, in those days success meant filling sixty-five seats for eight performances. Nowadays the amateur rights to those early plays alone earn Wilson a tidy annuity of $10,000 or so. But then, he worked odd jobs to pay the rent. Temporary typist. Reservations clerk at the Americana Hotel. A dishwashing gig, where some Spanish coworkers mispronounced his name as "Lance," which all his friends call him now. Oh, and he did get a grand sum of $5,000 to do a screen adaptation of *One Arm*, Tennessee Williams' short story about a male hustler. "Then the day after I finished, there was an invited preview of *Midnight Cowboy*, and there went that idea down the drain."

Wilson starts to rattle off choice vignettes from the unproduced screenplay, stories spiced with believable detail. The question presents itself—did Lanford ever hustle himself? "Sure. How am I supposed to know about all this?" He puts his sweater back on and closes the door to an unheated room. More fidgeting—or maybe he is nervous talking about this. "Certainly in Chicago and the first two years in New York. Through an agency." Graying, sallow, slightly cadaverous, Wilson doesn't exactly look like a former boy-for-hire—he is, after all, middle-aged. But his early book-jacket photos show a clear-eyed, thick-lipped hayseed kid you could imagine picking up spare cash with an occasional trick and returning to his furnished room to make notes of his escapades. "You get some fun lines," he says.

His whoring days didn't last long. Soon, he graduated to such prestigious patrons as the Rockefeller Foundation, whose playwriting grants got him through a couple of years while he worked on two plays that stiffed on Broadway—*The Gingham Dog*, the story of an interracial couple; and *Lemon Sky*, an autobiographical work starring the then unknown Christopher Walken. It wasn't long after this that he found a home at Circle Rep and struck pay dirt with *The Hot L Baltimore*.

Besides inspiring a short-lived television series and giving the playwright a steady income, *The Hot L Baltimore* changed Wilson's work dramatically. For the first time, he crossbred his poeticism with situational drama. But he reached the peak of his writing powers to date with the three Talley plays, which together represent as fine a piece of work as any American playwright has achieved.

A Tale Told, the first in the series but the last to be written, takes place on July 4th, 1944, in the Talley family mansion on the other side (the "good" side) of the town—Lebanon, Missouri—Wilson grew up in. The action of *Talley's Folly*, which won a Pulitzer Prize, occurs simultaneously in the boathouse down by the river during *A Tale Told*. And *Fifth of July* is set a generation later (July 4th and 5th, 1977) on the back porch of the Talley place; one character who was an infant offstage in *A Tale Told* is now a grown woman and mother, and the main character of *Talley's Folly* appears in *Fifth* as a candy box full of ashes. Formally, the plays are quite different. *Tale* is an almost old-fashioned, well-made play reminiscent of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, in which the greed and moral weakness of an aristocratic Southern family are exposed; *Folly*, written expressly for Judd Hirsch of TV's *Taxi!*, is "a no-holds-barred romantic story" in which a middle-aged Jewish accountant named Matt Friedman woos and wins the beautiful but feisty Sally Talley, the black sheep of the family; and *Fifth* is a serious contemporary comedy about the last Talley son, his male lover, Tally's unwed sister, and her daughter.

Together, these plays add up to a vivid portrait of America in this century. The historical perspective—the acknowledgement of patterns in human behavior, of cause and effect, of forces larger than personal need—is essential to great art. And Lanford Wilson is one of the few playwrights of his generation to tackle the great themes of contemporary life in the mythical arena of theater. "We have a history in this country of just ripping down and starting over," he says, "and it seems a little capricious or something. I'm not didactic, but I think I'm saying, 'Look at what you're throwing away. At least as it's going over the fence, check it out.'"

Oddly enough, Wilson doesn't consider the Talley plays his best work. That honor he reserves for *The Mound Builders*. Why? "It's exactly what I tried to do. I started thinking, 'Why do we work? And why do we create?' I addressed those questions throughout the play." And why do we? "I would

have to read you the whole play."

Which he almost does. He goes to the bookshelf, pulls out a hardbound copy, and leafs through it, citing different characters' takes on the subject. The archaeologist in charge of digging up the ruins of an ancient Indian culture reflects, "A man's life work is taken up, undertaken, I have no doubt, to blind him to the passing moon. I have no doubt that in an area of his almost unconscious he knows this and therefore is not blinded but only driven."

And what about Wilson himself, Mister Zeitgeist? Why does he work? Pause. Long pause. "Why"—Wilson's blue-gray eyes wander across the room, out the window, faraway for a moment—"is probably answered in that speech that I read. To blind myself to the passing moon. To forget time."

The answer hangs in the air, painfully honest. There's something lonely there. Too sad, too final.

"There's also a that's-what-I-do," Wilson continues, lighting a cigarette. "I'm excited by the actors, and I'm crazy for theater. Being involved in the company, I have to do something so they'll let me in."

We laugh. That reverie, that scary moment of aching emptiness passes, and Wilson plunges back into his usual chatter, talking engagedly about actors. He will describe performances from fifteen years ago as if he saw them yesterday and supply a running commentary on their palpable effect. "Your blood runs cold," or "Your heart stops," or "She was *only* brilliant, *only* perfect, and broke your heart in half, in half, in half."

Actors understandably appreciate having such an ally in the playwright's corner. Christopher Reeve, who played the lead in *Fifth of July* on Broadway (originally written for and played by William Hurt), says, "There's never a sense that he's cooling his heels waiting for you to get it right. I brought out different things in Kenny than Bill Hurt had played, and Lanford welcomed them. He seems eager to watch actors discover things in his plays."

"He knows that when you write something for somebody," quips Judd Hirsch, "you don't have to do so much work." Hirsch, who originated the role of the hotel clerk in *The Hot L Baltimore*, was both puzzled and suspicious when Wilson wrote *Talley's Folly* for him. But in rehearsal, he

discovered that “the character was at home in me. The humor was buried in me. He took from what I’m like, effectively.”

Wilson is probably the only major American playwright who has yet to be enticed to Hollywood. “I don’t particularly like movies,” says Wilson, “and as soon as you say that, movie people aren’t terribly interested anymore.” Norman Mailer recommended him to do the TV treatment of *The Executioner’s Song*, which he politely declined. “First of all, you’d have to read the whole book, and have you seen how thick it is?” The closest he’s come to the silver screen is with the unproduced adaptation of *One Arm*, unless you count *The Migrants*, the television movie he wrote with Tennessee Williams that did get made.

Notice how Tennessee Williams keeps coming back into the picture? Wilson says he’s friendly with Williams, having worked with him on the opera version of *Summer and Smoke*, as well as on *One Arm* and *The Migrants*. As there are certain, albeit superficial, similarities in their lives and work, does Wilson think Williams perceives in his writing the continuance of a tradition? “I don’t know. If he does, he’s never said anything about it. I don’t compare myself to Tennessee Williams, no, thank you. You’re talking Tennessee Williams. He’s great, and I’m not.” Modesty, modesty. Doesn’t the idea of sharing a bill representing American drama at the New World Festival suggest that they are at least peers? “If I’m that good, I don’t want to know about it. I have to live. It’s why I focus on writing for specific actors, working on specific things, and not on the hoopla. You can’t live up to the hoopla.”

So this two-bit hack scribbler hides out from the hoopla in Sag Harbor, where his friends consist mostly of antique dealers and architects and psychiatrists who inhabit the Hamptons. And now, as the sky turns purple outside the study’s picture windows and the wine bottle runs dry, we wander down the street to a little Italian restaurant to meet one of these friends for dinner, a kindly, gray-haired woman named Florence who runs a real-estate agency in Southampton. As they chat, they seem like odd intimates, even though they’re only neighbors. Then I remember that one of the characters in the new play—the one that’s half-finished—is the widow of a somewhat renowned painter, a description that also fits Florence. Somewhere underneath the veal parmigiana, Wilson is probably soaking up her cadences and concerns, piecing together the pattern of another story from America. And that’s where I leave him. Still working.”

Lanford Wilson's 50 Works for the Stage

1. *So Long At the Fair* (1963)
2. *No Trespassing* (1964)
3. *Home Free* (1964)
4. *Balm In Gilead* (1964)
5. *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964)
6. *Ludlow Fair* (1965)
7. *Sex Is Between Two People* (1965)
8. *The Rimers of Eldritch* (1965)
9. *This Is the Rill Speaking* (1965)
10. *Days Ahead* (1965)
11. *The Sand Castle* (1965)
12. *Wandering: A Turn* (1966)
13. *Miss Williams: A Turn* (1967)
14. *Untitled Play*, music by Al Carmines (1967)
15. *The Gingham Dog* (1968)
16. *The Great Nebula in Orion* (1970)
17. *Lemon Sky* (1970)
18. *Serenading Louie* (1970)
19. *Sextet (Yes)* (a play for voices, 1971)
20. *Summer and Smoke* (1971, opera adaptation of the Williams play)
21. *Ikke, Ikke, Nye, Nye* (1971)
22. *The Family Continues* (1972)
23. *The Hot L Baltimore* (1973)
24. *The Mound Builders* (1975)
25. *Brontosaurus* (1977)
26. *Fifth of July* (1978)

27. *Talley's Folly* (1979)
28. *Bar Play (*1979)
29. *Talley and Son* (1981; revised 1985)
30. *Angels Fall* (1982)
31. *Thymus Vulgaris* (1982)
32. *Three Sisters* (adaptation of a play by Chekhov, 1985)
33. *Say de Kooning* (1985)
34. *Sa-Hurt?* (1986)
35. *A Betrothal* (1986)
36. *Burn This* (1987)
37. *Dying Breed* (1987)
38. *A Poster of the Cosmos* (1987)
39. *Hall of North American Forests* (1987)
40. *The Moonshot Tape* (1990)
41. *Redwood Curtain* (1992)
42. *Eukiah* (1992)
43. *Abstinence* (1994)
44. *By the Sea By the Beautiful Sea* (1994)
45. *A Sense of Place* (1996)
46. *Stoop* (1997)
47. *Sympathetic Magic* (1998)
48. *Victory on Mrs. Dandywine's Island*
49. *Book of Days* (2000)
50. *Rain Dance* (2002)

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