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"All the world's a stage…": Lanford Wilson's Mirroring of the Contemporary U.S.

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Along with Sam Shepard and David Mamet, Lanford Wilson is one of the most renowned contemporary American playwrights. With over forty plays to his name he is also one of the most prolific. His plays are widely performed Off and Off-off Broadway and in regional and university theatres. His works have been honoured with numerous awards: Obie and Tonies, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, New York Drama Critic's Circles, a Drama-logue, a Vernon Rice, a Brandeis University Creative Arts, the Institute of Arts and Letters award and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Even though the author is not so popular in Europe -- the reason for that being perhaps that he is so typically American -- he is well worth studying, the more so that his plays are interesting from a sociological point of view. Indeed, his works are so strongly rooted in American civilisation and heritage that they may contribute to a better awareness of what life in the post-war United States is like. It is, after all, one of the theatre's traditional functions to mirror the society it lives in, and Wilson gives a clear, often critical reflection, of present day America.

Wilson's plays are like slices of real life. The characters that he draws are people of flesh and blood, who speak (Snellinx and Van de Walle) and "act" like people of flesh and blood, they are not artificial creatures who can only survive on the stage. Lanford Wilson's oeuvre mirrors the "comédie humaine" of the post-war United States. The characters that populate his plays represent all social layers in American society: he stages junkies, common whores, pimps, teachers, preachers, highbrow professors, artists, restaurateurs... They are all confronted with problems common to any modern man or woman.

Themes

For a start, I should like to point out that the synopses of the plays mentioned are not included in this paper; this would confuse, rather than illuminate. I shall merely restrict myself to picking out and describing the characters that are most suitable to illustrate Wilson's view of American society.

Even if one Wilson play is never like another, it can be said that there is one consistent line in Wilson's work as far as themes are concerned. All his

plays deal with loss, in any sense of the word, some deal with rootlessness, others with loss of lives, and some with loss of moral and social values. In this paper, however, I should like to focus on the side themes, as they are particularly interesting from a socio-cultural point of view.

Let us begin by examining which contemporary socio-cultural problems Lanford Wilson introduces. We will begin on a small scale, with the microcosm, i.e. the family. Then we will move on to a wider context, the macrocosm of society as a whole.

1. The Microcosm

1.1. Family and family relationships

In all his plays Lanford Wilson is very concerned with the general "family", nuclear or extended. This interest probably stems from the fact that Wilson has always been attempting to find a replacement for his own family, which broke up on the night his sister was stillborn and his father left his wife and child for another woman. Lanford Wilson was five years old at the time. Ever since then, he has been trying to "reconstruct" his family. He finally managed to do so in 1969, when he joined Rob Thirkield and Tanya Berezin in founding Circle Rep. In this way, he did not only establish a theatre, but also his "theatrical" family. In much the same way, his characters attempt to find a family in which they can feel at home. In Wilson's plays characters that are surrounded by a loving family circle have more chances of coping successfully with the slings and arrows of life than those who cannot claim such an advantage do.

5th of July is revealing in this respect. In this play, Ken Talley, a traumatised teacher who lost both legs in the Vietnam War, succeeds in finding his place in the community again because of the help of his lover Jed, his sister June and his Aunt Sally. I deliberately avoid mentioning his parents, because generally, Lanford Wilson's parent characters are not exactly successful at rearing children; this phenomenon again may find its root in the author's own upbringing. Mothers fail especially badly: For example those in *Lemon Sky* and *The Moonshot Tape* simply disregard their daughters' complaints about their stepfathers' incestuous behaviour for the sake of avoiding conflicts with their husbands. Fortunately, to compensate for these "defective" mothers, Lanford Wilson stages plenty of wonderful aunts who amply make up for their sister's or sister-in-law's defects. One of these "wonderful aunts" is Geneva in *Redwood Curtain*. Another one is Ken's Aunt Sally, whom I shall discuss later.

Ken Talley had been a gifted teacher before being drafted into the army, but lost all confidence in his abilities after his Tour in Vietnam. He rejects the idea of ever teaching again until his Aunt Sally and his lover convince him that, even as a double amputee, he has a worthwhile mission to fulfil in society.

Two other characters in *5th of July*, John and Gwen Landis, are not as fortunate as Ken is to be backed up by family members. As a result, they are only committed to their own cause. Their relationship stands in a stark contrast with the relationships prevailing in the 1977 Talley household. Gwen and John may be rich but they are unhappy and barren and have no loving family to support them. They have travelled the world in pursuit of happiness -

- "trying to make themselves conspicuous" *(Fifth of July* 35) as Gwen says -- yet fail to find something really worthwhile. This holds true in particular for John, who is depicted as a rapacious character, preying on his wife and on anyone he lays his eyes on, but who is finally turned into the buffoon of the play. Gwen is shown in a more favourable light. She is undoubtedly talented but too self-centred. Her urge to be in the limelight all the time is no less than pathological.

As a nuclear structure of society, the Talley family as a whole is well worth studying. Wilson wrote three plays about this family. Together they form a kind of chronicle, starting in 1944, ending in 1977. At first the author contemplated writing even more plays about the Talleys, set at different periods in history, but he now seems to have abandoned the idea.

If we look at the chronology of events, we notice that those that chronologically occurred first were staged last. Indeed, *Talley & Son* presents events that are contemporary of those which occur in *Talley's Folly*, in 1944, on the verge of the end of the 2nd World War. *5th of July*, however, occurs 33 years later, in 1977. The first two plays provide interesting insights into the relationships among the members of the Talley clan, on the family background and on Lanford Wilson's view on family relationships in general.

Let us have a look at Ken Talley's ancestors as they are presented in *Talley & Son* and *Talley's Folly*. Interestingly, Wilson calls *Talley & Son* a naturalistic "Ibsenian" play, which becomes clear from the characters that are staged.

Except for Sally, Timmy (the son who dies in the war) and Lottie Talley, the members of this family are not exactly people that anyone would want to have for a friend. Hypocrisy, greed and mendacity drive them all:

- Even at age 80, the pillar of society, Calvin Talley, is thrilled when he can deceive others, especially people who are worse off than he is. He keeps information on his business strictly to himself notwithstanding the fact that his son is his business partner. He even goes as far as to keep all his financial records under lock and key. He actually hates all his children, except for Eldon's dead brother, Stuart. He tells Eldon to his face that "Talley & Son" was not named for him but for his dead brother, for example.
- Eldon himself is a notorious womaniser, who treats his wife, his mistress, his illegitimate daughter and his other children in an equally appalling way. Since bad father / offspring relationships seem to run in this family, he feels the same contempt for his daughter Sally as his father does for Lottie. His behaviour towards Matt Friedman, Sally's suitor, is a clear reflection of his anti-Semitism. It is only at the end of the play, after his favourite son's death, that he manages to cut himself loose from his father's bad influence, but even this does not redeem him.
- Eldon's son, Buddy, is equally despicable. Since womanising runs in the family, he, too, betrays his wife and wants to make his brother Timmy the patsy of his philandering. He sides with his grandfather against his father only for the sake of money and power and actually attacks Matt Friedman, chasing him off the farmyard with a gun, when the latter wants to visit Sally.

The women, Netta and Olive, are a little less repellent, but nevertheless, they also have their own share of bad characteristics.

- Netta's nature takes a positive twist towards the end of the play. She has turned a blind eye on her husband's extra-marital affairs and treated her daughter and daughter-in-law harshly. At the end of the play, however, when she finds out that her favourite son has died, she comes into her own, turns Eldon out of her bedroom, and refuses to keep up appearances any longer.
- Olive is an unusual Wilson woman in that she has few redeeming characteristics. She is depicted as a backbiting, greedy, selfish, nosy gossipmonger.

Obviously this family is not particularly likeable if it were not for the few favourable characters that are staged in the two other Talley plays as well.

- Lottie is a dedicated, liberated woman -- she was a feminist before feminism had even been heard of -- who sees to it that Sally, her favourite, is well taken care of before she dies. Lottie's attitude runs counter to her family's greedy life-style. In her youth, she sided with the socially underprivileged and blacks. She contracted radium poisoning when earning her own living and only returned to her father's house when she was forced to because she was too ill with cancer to take care of herself.
- Sally strongly resembles Lottie in that she has an independent mind and that she, too, is concerned with the workers and the working conditions in her father's firm. When she was a Sunday school teacher she stirred up a row, because she preferred to discuss Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Saint Augustine ("Businessmen will not inherit the Kingdom", *Talley's Folly*, 32) rather than the Methodist reader. She is a selfless woman who finally finds peace with Matt Friedman after having been let down by her one-time lover and the rest of the family.
- Timmy is dead when *Talley & Son* starts and makes sporadic entrances as a ghost, but what the audience finds out about him from the rest of the characters, is that he is as positive as Lottie and Sally are. He, too, is devoted to higher ideals than just to making money.

From all this it becomes obvious that Wilson does not exactly portray families -- the nuclei of society after all -- in the most favourable of lights, except for the Friedman-Talley household, where dedication and understanding are important and efforts are made towards building a working man / woman relationship.

1.2. The relationship between men and women

In all of Wilson's 43 plays there is only one in which marriage is depicted as positive (in *5th of July* and in retrospect, because one of the partners, Matt, is dead). Sally and Matt Friedman's happy marriage stands in a stark contrast with John and Gwen Landis' manipulative relationship, in which sexual and financial exploitation are the key words.

In the other plays in which married (heterosexual) couples feature, the bonds are not necessarily as self-serving, but equally feeble. Consider for example the couple in *Lemon Sky* or those in *The Moonshot Tape*, *The Great Nebula in Orion*, *The Mound Builders*, and especially in *Serenading Louie*, where marriage ends in murder. This negative attitude

towards legalised relationships corresponds with Lanford Wilson's own point of view. Here, again, his parents' unhappy marriage must have served as an example. In my interview with him, the author confirmed that he thought it was a bad idea, especially for women, to get married and he cited the example of his fellow founders of Circle Rep, Rob Thirkield and Tanya Berezin, who "had had a perfectly happy relationship until they legalised it and within six weeks they were cheating on each other" (Snellinx). If ever a marriage is successful in Lanford Wilson's plays, be it in *5th of July* or *Angels Fall* it is because Sally Talley and the two women in *Angels Fall*, Vita and Marion, are very much their own woman. They are serene, realistic and intelligent, and quite independent from their husbands.

Nevertheless, it is obviously Wilson's opinion that relationships need to be worked at, whether they be legalised or not, straight or gay. This line of thought becomes obvious in one of Wilson's early monologues. *The Madness of Lady Bright* shows us an ageing homosexual who goes mad in his room on a hot New York summer afternoon. The play was modelled on Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, where a young Afro-American woman loses her mind. Wilson gives his own play another dimension, though. Whereas the young black woman in Kennedy's play goes through an identity crisis, the queen Leslie Bright in the Wilson play realises he has lost his looks and, as such, is no longer attractive to other homosexuals. Hence, his promiscuous behaviour will have to come to an end. The audience does not have any empathy with Leslie Bright. He is a pathetic character whose unhappiness is of his own making. He never felt the need to make an effort to establish a lasting bond with any of his many lovers. In consequence, he is on his own when he gets older and has lost his looks.

By far the most poignant description of the aloofness with which modern day couples regard relationships is given in Wilson's *Burn This*, where Anna and Pale struggle towards each other and strike it off, but realise that there is no guarantee their relationship will last. Modern man is becoming wary of commitment, especially of emotional commitment.

1.3. Women

Lanford Wilson gives women a special place in his plays and usually depicts them in a very favourable light. There are few, in fact only one, real female villains in all of his plays. Women invariably have the edge on men and Wilson makes this abundantly clear to his audience, sometimes in the most fleeting of ways. Having them use specific linguistic structures, usually only employed by males, for example, conveys them a sense of power. A colleague and I have made a study of the use of these linguistic structures for *The Mound Builders*, and undoubtedly this can be done for other Wilson plays as well (Snellinx and Van de Walle). It would certainly provide interesting material for a more elaborate study.

Wilson's female characters are usually strong women who can stand their own ground. Let us consider the female protagonists in *The Mound Builders*, for example. The women evolve and come into their own at the end of the play. They are the survivors, not the men. Ultimately, the male characters are destroyed, psychologically and physically: two men die and the male lead, a professor in archaeology, is incapable of functioning properly at the end of the play.

Women are rarely depicted as victims, except in *Thymus Vulgaris*, *Lemon Sky* and *The Moonshot Tape. Thymus Vulgaris* gives a clear example of how women are used and abused.

Evelyn, a down-and-out who is about to get married to a grapefruit king suddenly makes up her mind to call the wedding off. She eminently shows how women are usually forced into the position of the, what she calls, "eatens", and preyed upon by the stronger elements in society, in this case, the men. She intimates however, "that it takes a lot of fortitude being an eaten" *(Thymus Vulgaris* 28). The "eatens" are creative in the sense that they have the capacity to continually regenerate themselves, which enables the "eaters" to stay alive. *Lemon Sky* and *The Moonshot Tape* depict the plight of teenage girls who are abused by their stepfathers, but in *The Moonshot Tape* Wilson allows his protagonist to get some of her own back. As an adult, best-selling author Diane in turn rapes her stepfather and writes an account of his misdemeanour on his bare chest in indelible ink for everyone to read.

As much as Wilson likes women, and however favourably he depicts them, he is not completely blind to some of their defects. He has strong reservations about Women's Lib, for example. In my interview with him, the author hinted that Women's Lib as a movement has not been entirely successful, to put it mildly. The author stated, "Women in America are so fucked up. The whole feminist thing is so appalling it's ridiculous" (Snellinx). Consider Wilson's emancipated women in this respect, their champion being June Talley. In *5th of July*, June, the Woman's Lib activist, is presented as a rather unsuccessful lover and mother who has not been able to put any of her sixties ideals into practise.

2. The Macrocosm

So far we have looked at the microcosm of the Wilsonian family. How about the macrocosm now? How does the author see our present society? With this in mind, Lanford Wilson focuses on a number of topics.

2.1. Loss of moral and social values

What was America like, what has it come to? Wilson wonders in his plays.

Although this theme occurs frequently in his work, Wilson cannot possibly be called a boring, alienated moralist. In many of his plays, Wilson complains about what has become of America. In *The Mound Builders*, Wilson depicts the complete disregard that people have of their heritage. In that play Chad Jasker, a farmer's son, for example, would gladly sacrifice the ancient mounds, bulldoze them and replace them by a holiday resort. And in essence, what do the archaeologists in that play do other than destroy in order to preserve? After all, they, too, flatten the Indian burial mounds for the sake of fame and glory.

It needs to be said, though, that Wilson refrains from consistently picturing the past as better than the present. His description of the ancient Mound Builder mores testifies to that, and so does the description of most of the Talleys' behaviour in *Talley's Folly*and in *Talley & Son*. Wilson contrasts the complete disregard for tradition with America's former vigorous, pioneering spirit, the glorious past as opposed to the shabby present. This point becomes tangible particularly in *The Hot l Baltimore*, where the missing 'e' from the hotel marquee does not only symbolise the deterioration of the once renowned art deco hotel now about to be torn down, but stands for the general decay into which the US have fallen.

In the play, the Hotel Baltimore was one of the best hotels in Baltimore during the heyday of the railroad. Now, like the railway service in general, it has fallen into disrepair and

is inhabited by a collection of marginal characters, who will have to find another place to live after the ultimate demolition of the hotel. In this sense the hotel is the microcosmic representation of all American society. Wilson sets the tone at the very beginning of the play, which has an elegiac introduction in prose that begins: "Once there was the railroad..." (*The Hot l Baltimore* xiii)

Parallel to the decay into which the hotel has fallen and its impending physical destruction, Wilson depicts the overall deterioration of the social fabric, the loss of values in America. In *The Hot l Baltimore* quite a few problems are put forward: Children reject their parents, grandchildren give up on their relatives, parents turn their children out, young girls are forced to resort to prostitution to finance their father's drinking habits, old people are robbed by youngsters.

The time at which the action in this play takes place is also revealing in this respect. "The time is a recent Memorial Day", Wilson states in his description of the scene (The *Hot l Baltimore* xiv). The choice of the time is appropriate in this case, since the hotel can be considered to be one more victim in the War of Progress. Memorial Day is a day of remembrance for those who were heroic enough to sacrifice their lives for ideas and ideals, and thus constitute another sharp contrast with the tepid, present-day representatives of humanity that haunt the hotel, like ghosts from a greater past. Wilson emphasises the irreverent way with which the past is regarded by ironically having some characters actually forget that it is Memorial Day.

Another play in which the loss of moral and social values is even more prominently and painfully present is *The Rimers of Eldritch*, one of Wilson's earliest plays. Eldritch is a small midwestern town, where appearances count a lot more than honesty and truthfulness and where anybody who behaves even slightly differently from the accepted pattern is mercilessly attacked and, if possible, destroyed. Wilson calls the inhabitants of the little town 'Rimers', because, like rime covers the dead plants in winter, they smooth over their wickedness with a smug, quasi godfearing attitude. Instead of complying with their so-called religious code, however, they go about destroying people psychologically and physically. The trial of Skelly Manor, the town outcast, is particularly revealing in this respect. Skelly may be a dirty old voyeur, yet he is innocent of the attempted rape of the crippled girl, Eva. The real culprit is Eva's friend, Robert, who eagerly perjures himself to avert suspicion. Eva -- also a little Rimer -- goes mute to prevent the truth from coming out.

The other inhabitants of Eldritch are equally despicable: they show a clean front, but what goes on behind closed doors is quite a different matter. The epitome of "normality-Eldritch-Style" is the Johnson family. No farmer can be more average than Peck, no mother plainer than Mavis. They have raised their children to stick to the straight and narrow, to be law-abiding and devout citizens. Whether they have been successful at this is questionable. Their daughter Patsy is a regular nymphomaniac for whom nothing in pants is safe. She starts up relationships with several men at the same time, the innkeeper's (Cora's) lover, Walter, included and gets herself pregnant. Walter leaves town as a result of her threat to inform Cora about their relationship. Cora is devastated at his departure. Then Patsy bulldozes a high school boy from a neighbouring town into a shotgun wedding to cover up for her situation.

Her brother Josh is no better. Apart from taunting the town outcast (Skelly), he finds no fault with beating his girlfriend up when she refuses to have sex with him and poisons her dog, whose barking gives them away when they are courting on the front porch. If we realise, then, that Josh is the best friend of the town hero, we know what is going on. The rest of the townspeople are equally detestable. Granny bashing, for example, seems to be the favourite activity of one of the Eldritch spinsters, who regularly beats up her old mother.

The strongest and most outspoken social criticism can be seen in *Tally's Folly,* where the protagonist Matt Friedman pinpoints the problems of the US at the end of the 2nd World War. On close scrutiny it is obvious that the nature of the problems has not changed since then. Matt points out the danger of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism and of focusing too much on prosperity. He compares the feelings prevalent at the end of the Depression with those pervading the pre-victory period. After the Depression there was hope, "people found strength in union", they believed in achieving something together. With peace within foreseeable reach, "hope" is not the keyword but "prosperity". People are in "great danger of prosperity", Matt says, and intimates that this concern for success and material values will bring about extreme selfishness (*Talley's Folly* 5). The situation does not seem to have changed much, which brings us to another aspect of Wilson's social criticism, the problem of commitment.

2.2. Commitment.

Wilson rather emphasises people's lack of commitment. The author always puts great emphasis on finding one's mission in life. This is clear, as we have already mentioned in *5th of July*, where Ken Talley's problems are solved as soon as he realises that he still has an important role to fulfil in teaching youngsters.

In *Burn This* the stress on emotional and social commitment is even stronger. Both Anna and Pale lament our present day civilisation, where people have to fight to preserve their dignity. And there is more. Modern man has a thorough distrust of anything emotional and would rather live in an emotional vacuum than give his feelings away. Apart from being wary of them, man is also increasingly incapable of expressing his emotions, which results in the characters' resorting to vulgar language and profanities because they feel uncomfortable as soon as feelings and private matters need to be discussed.

In *Angels Fall*, too, the main theme is rediscovering dedication. Problems disappear as soon as the characters find that in truly being themselves, they can commit themselves better to other individuals and to causes.

2.3. The Protestant Work Ethic,

One aspect that contributes to the "salvation" of the characters in *Angels Fall* is the relief they find in their work. Working and doing one's work well is invariably presented as a means of redemption. Wilson is a hard worker himself; just think of how prolific he is. All his characters, except perhaps for the junkies, hustlers and whores from *Balm in Gilead*, are hard workers. I shall just give a few examples. Sally in *5th of July* faces her move to California with apprehension, because she cannot for the life of her imagine what she is supposed to do in "a place with a hundred percent unemployment" (*Fifth of July* 17). In *Angels Fall* the

characters are redeemed as soon as they can dedicate themselves to their work again, work that is described in terms of a vocation, rather than as an ordinary job.

There are three more side themes in Lanford Wilson's plays that reflect on society as a whole: homosexuality, AIDS and environmental pollution.

2.4. Gay and straight

Gay characters occur abundantly in Wilson's plays and are not merely relegated to his one acts; they are staged in his full-length plays as well. Yet none of his works belong in the actual realm of the real gay plays.

His very first gay character is the extravagant Leslie Bright in *The Madness of Lady Bright*. At the time Wilson wondered whether such a character would be acceptable, even for an experimental theatre as the Cino, but Neil Flanagan, to whom the play is dedicated, convinced him to go on with it. It was the first play ever to stage a queen and became very successful, despite its experimental nature. Although staged in New York, Leslie Bright is a typical Chicago queen. Bright is the most alienated person imaginable His ultimate mental disintegration is triggered when, on a sweltering New York summer afternoon, he fails to make contact with anybody but official, impersonal organisations such as American Airlines and Dial-a-Prayer. In *The Madness of Lady Bright*, which is not a real gay play, but whose protagonist simply happens to be gay, Wilson unintentionally phrases a rather negative statement about homosexuals. Bright's loneliness is of his own making and his whole lifestyle runs counter to that of the average Protestant-work-ethic inspired American who, as we have already established, is so popular in Lanford Wilson's plays.

Say De Kooning, written on commission for the East End Gay Organisation in the 80's, shows us an entirely different picture of gay relationships. All three characters, Bob, a gay man, and Willie and Mandy, a lesbian couple, are hard-working people with clear-cut aims in their lives. In contrast with Leslie Bright, the three characters are intelligent, sensitive, dedicated and caring people. Again, this play is not a typically gay play because it concentrates on problems common to gay and straight people alike.

A Poster of the Cosmos is probably the only Wilson one act that could be called a gay play, since it deals with AIDS, a problem that is -- still -- most felt in the gay community. AIDS plays a very important part in the play; in fact it could be considered as one of the actors. Yet here, too, the firm relationship between Tom and Johnny that extends even beyond death is put in the foreground.

The first full-length play in which gay characters are featured is *5th of July*. Here, again, homosexuality is of secondary importance, rather than an issue. Once more, Wilson conveys the message he has given us in the other "gay" plays: being gay is, as he told me himself "no big deal" (Snellinx) and gay couples like Jed and Ken can lead a perfectly harmonious life, perhaps even more so than some of their straight contemporaries.

In *Burn This*, which gained Lanford Wilson international recognition (it was performed in Paris and London), the author stages quite a different type of homosexual than he has so far. Larry, Anna and Robbie's gay roommate, is a mere utility character, intended to provide comic relief, yet he is far more militant than any of Wilson's gays so far. He has a way with words and is never at a loss for a pointed remark. He feels a lot more at ease with

his homosexuality than the straight characters in the play do with their own sexual orientation, and he is far more explicit about his orientation than any of Wilson's other gay characters.

To conclude this section about gay characters it can be said that Wilson's gays are neither stereotypes nor caricatures. They blend in perfectly in their mostly straight environment and are neither ill at ease with their orientation nor militant about it. This attitude is certainly a reflection of Wilson's feelings about his own homosexuality. In my interview with him he emphatically stated that for him "it has never been a very large thing, and so many of my friends just don't really think very much about it, and the gay people don't and the straight people don't, and they live together perfectly happily*" (*Snellinx).

2.5. HIV, AIDS

The problem of AIDS and HIV infection is dealt with most poignantly in one of his monologues, *A Poster of the Cosmos.* The play shows us that HIV infection and AIDS need not necessarily be the result of reckless sexual behaviour. Even though the dead character, Johnny, resorted to loose sexual contacts at one time, the way his boyfriend will probably contract the illness is a defiant act of love: he will deliberately contaminate himself with his dead partner's blood so that he can die too. Here again, AIDS is not the main issue. Far more emphasis is laid on commitment.

2.6. Pollution and the Environment

Apart from these social concerns, Wilson is also worried about pollution and other environmental problems. These concerns become apparent as early as *The Rimers of Eldritch* where he describes how the miners raped the land and subsequently deserted it, leaving it to the farmers, for whom it had become useless. *Angels Fall* is more emphatic in this respect, since the whole point of this locked-door play is that a number of people are being held up in a New Mexico mission church because of a nuclear disaster. Wilson shows how nature is being sacrificed for the sake of progress and how the Native Americans in particular are being threatened with the consequences of nuclear pollution. In *Redwood Curtain,* too, Wilson intimates how an ecologically important redwood patch is cut down for the sake of profit. All in all it is obvious that Wilson feels very strongly about the wilful disregard for nature and heritage in the US.

Conclusion

So we can say that there is a consistent line in Lanford Wilson's work. All his plays deal with loss. The side themes, however, are more varied. Even though Wilson disclaims being a political author, especially the side themes in his plays show that he is, because he is concerned with what is going on in the United States. The picture he paints of contemporary America is not exactly a favourable one. Even if, as he says, "the characters are emblematic of the country"(Snellinx)-- which is pretty bad -- at least some of them show that redemption is possible.

The gist of my paper can best be summed up by a quotation from Frank Rich:

> Wilson has never been an insular author, bound by the world of theatre. The real world always invades

his work. Without being ideological, journalistic or preachy about it, Wilson's plays have given constant voice to the dispossessed -- the lost or shunned American souls who have been cast

out of the mainstream, sometimes by specific cataclysms (the Vietnam War) but just as often by their refusal to march in step with familial, sexual or capitalist orthodoxy. (He is) a writer who illuminates the deepest dramas of American life with poetry and compassion.

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