Talley’s Folly

By

Lanford Wilson

A Director’s Concept

"...Mr. Wilson is one of our most gifted playwrights, a dramatist who deals perceptively with definably American themes...he introduces us to two wonderful people, humanizing and warming them with the radiance of his abundant talent. Talley's Folly is a play to savour and cheer."—NY Times.

"It is perhaps the simplest, the most lyrical play Wilson has written—a funny, sweet, touching and marvellously written and contrived love poem for an apple and an orange."—NY Post.

Introduction.

Talley’s Folly shows one evening in 1944 in the courtship of two unlikely lovers, Sally Talley and Matt Friedman. Sally is from a conservative, small-town, wealthy family of bigoted Protestants, and Matt is a Jewish accountant twelve years older than Sally. The story of how they become brave enough to reveal their most painful secrets touched audiences and critics, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980.

Argument:

Talley's Folly is the bittersweet story of two awkward and emotionally wounded people, and their last chance at love. Sally is from a conservative, small-town, wealthy family of bigoted Methodists, and Matt is a Jewish accountant 12 years older than Sally. The story opens with the frank revelation that this is a play, the set represents a boathouse surrounded by weeds and trees, and Matt speaks directly to the audience, announcing the play will run for 97 minutes with no intermission. He is somewhat nervous as he reveals that, one year earlier, he met Sally at a dance and the two were together in this same boathouse. He has returned to ask for her hand.

Because of the unwillingness of her family to embrace different ways of thinking, Sally's only pleasures come outside her home, when she is at work or with friends.
The titular folly is a neglected boathouse by the river where Sally retreats to have a moment’s peace from her overbearing family. But the folly is also the spot where, the summer before, Matt wooed Sally during their bungled week-long courtship. He’s made a special trip from the city to Lebanon to convince Sally to be with him.

The tale is, as Matt Friedman tells us, ”a waltz... a no-holds-barred romantic story.” Yet it is much more. As Matt, a St. Louis accountant, woos Sally Talley of Lebanon, Missouri, and strives to break through her protective shell, pieces of his past are revealed. He and his family were victims of European anti-Semitism, and Matt cannot forget that fellow humans destroyed his family. His horror finds expression in the decaying Victorian boathouse on a quiet river, as he and Sally slowly draw together on a July evening in 1944.

Sally, too, has known suffering. Now a spinster of thirty-one, she escapes the restraint of small-town values not her own by retreating to the ornate boathouse, which is known to the townspeople as ”Talley's Folly.” Here she need answer to no one except on this one evening, when she must answer to Matt. With compassion and humour, Lanford Wilson shows us two lively, lovable people opening up their interior worlds. The triumph of Matt and Sally is the triumph of Lanford Wilson's humanity.

Matt states in the play’s prologue that the story is a waltz. And as we see in Matt and Sally's hit-and-miss interactions, it's a very delicate, unsteady waltz--which is what makes Talley's Folly so delightful. The two characters stumble through a romantic pas de deux, making the same missteps we've all made, only condensed here into a dramatically taut, heartfelt 97 minutes. That Talley's Folly has no intermission means the escalation in the tension between Matt and Sally has no abatement.

Matt and Sally each have secrets that they must come to terms with before they can fully give themselves over to each other--and these are the kinds of secrets that they have to reveal to themselves, not just to each other; they are secrets that have come to shape the people they've become.

What's engrossing about Talley's Folly is that even though Sally and Matt discuss the circumstances going on in each other's lives, there's an otherworldly, detached air about the folly that enables them to laboriously iron out the wrinkles in the tapestry of their relationship. Sally, for one, refuses to acknowledge that they even have a relationship. And, like a dance, there's a great deal of fancy footwork to keep a respectable distance. Matt advances a step, Sally retreats a step.

Lanford Wilson uses a theme of chosen emotional isolationism making real interpersonal connection difficult if not impossible. His characters use the analogy of people walking through their life like eggs; they try not to get so close
to one another as to get cracked. Sally and Matt must break free from the shells of their solitude to join their lives and form a union. In order to do this they must first trust one another enough to reveal the painful secrets which have led to their own isolation. What secret events can make one choose such loneliness? For Matt it is the painful remembrance of his family's torture and death as a result of World War I Europe. He fears marital intimacy would bring with it the expectation of fatherhood. And he sees a world filled with war, not one into which he would bring a child. For Sally it is the teenaged illness which left her barren. Her inability to have a child resulted in the disgrace of a broken engagement to the golden child of a prominent family.

It would seem at first that perhaps the "folly" in Talley's Folly is the clumsy courtship of two unlikely lovers. But folly is actually by definition the word used to describe a Victorian boathouse. And it is in the Talley family folly on the river that our play takes place. The once ornate folly with its mini-gazebo was built in 1870 by Sally's uncle. Now it is an unused and neglected boathouse, a private place that only Sally goes - and on this night, Matt as well. It is clear that in a Freudian-esque way, the folly or boathouse may symbolize Sally's womb. Its original function - to house a vessel - is no longer needed. She, like the folly, is neglected and feeling empty. She runs from love out of the fear of rejection. Fearing the same rejection, Matt tentatively puts aside his own fear for this one night in hopes of finding love.

**Background:**

Talley's Folly, Fifth of July and Talley & Son comprise a trilogy of plays written by Lanford Wilson called the "Talley Family Series." Though chronologically, Talley's Folly, set in 1944 takes place first, it is Fifth of July which was written first. Set in 1977, it tells the story of the Talley family's struggle with the effects of the Vietnam War, and one of the character Aunt Sally's recent loss of her husband. Wilson later wrote Talley's Folly to tell the story of Aunt Sally and the late Uncle Matthew. The play opened at the Circle Repertory Theatre on May 3, 1979. It moved to Broadway on February 20, 1980 , received the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, and one Tony Award for Scenic Design (advertisements for this production errantly cite two Tony Awards).

Born in Lebanon, Missouri in 1937, Lanford Wilson was raised in the Ozarks until, as a teenager, he moved to California to live with his father, from whom his mother had been long divorced. He began his career as a playwright in the early 1960s at the Caffe Cino in Greenwich Village with one-act plays such as Ludlow Fair, Home Free, and The Madness of Lady Bright. He soon moved to off-Broadway with Balm in Gilead in 1965 and The Rimers of Eldrich in 1965. Wilson was a founding member of the Circle Repertory Company, (better known as Circle Rep) which began in 1969. Many of his plays were first presented there,
including *Hot L Baltimore*, which won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Outer Critics' Circle Award, and the Obie Award, and *Fifth of July*, which later had a successful production on Broadway. Wilson's 1979 play, *Talley's Folly* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

*Fifth of July, Talley's Folly,* and *Talley and Son* are all part of the Talley trilogy cycle of plays, revolving around Lebanon, Missouri, and exploring the disillusionment in America caused by the Vietnam War.

In addition to writing plays, Wilson has written the texts for several twentieth century operas, including at least two collaborations with composer Lee Hoiby, *Summer and Smoke* (1971) and *This is the Rill Speaking* (1992).

**Style and approach:**

In theatre style, it is minimalist, and the setting would be relatively spare. The single set consists of the folly itself, and the script indicates that a raked platform would be best considered in order to punctuate the off-centeredness of the characters inner lives, as well to improve the sight lines. Sound is an important element to the story – the frog's chorus, the lapping of the water at the shore's edge, the band in the distance, and a rich soundscape can help to bring out the perfume of the story. Costuming should reflect the time it is set in, the mid 1940's.

In directing Mamet, Pinter or any of the other modern Minimalists, the author dictates the story and interpretation strongly, and while one is somewhat constrained directorially in one respect due to this, there is tremendous freedom in another respect to get to the "meat" of the ideas behind the story. The play is fairly straightforward and Wilson very much dictates the mood and sentiment for the piece - this isn't Shakespeare, which is fairly wide open for wild interpretation - the play is simple and concentrated. Wilson is a playwright in the Mamet mode - he offers questions but does not necessarily answer them, although this is perhaps his most positive play.

This is a layered play, which relies on mood and language and an aura of romance, but it is also very direct, and one of the rare modern plays where what lies beneath the surface is a completion of what is in the spoken text, rather than a complete contradiction of the text. Wilson offers us a sparring match, which is both where the interest and the tension lies. It is here that the buried past has to be revealed, stifled hopes aired and put at last to rest, and a future settled, for weal or woe. It is a tone poem, not a symphony.
**Language**

Why present it in English? To start with, the language sparkles. Lanford Wilson's famous command of dialogue is particularly marked in what can only be described as Matt's verbal gymnastics. He plays with words and ideas and showers them over the intransigent Sally who, he notes, despite her protests, has stopped to change out of her uniform and into a beautiful dress before coming to meet him. But it is in the two passages in which Matt and Sally deal with pain from their pasts that Wilson's gift of language is most dazzling. While I happily acknowledge that this can be effectively translated into Dutch, it would seem a pity, in a country where so many people comfortably speak English, to lose the charm and insouciance of the original. Additionally, there are many tourists and non Dutch speaking professionals who visit English language theatre as well as the Dutch themselves. Based on the last 5 years, audiences at theaterworks amsterdam, an English-language theatre company based in Amsterdam have been roughly half non-Dutch and half Dutch. So we see a clear precedent for presenting the play in original and guaranteeing an audience for it.

**Director's Reflections:**

This is a tale of persuasion, of wooing, and if it were music, it would be, as Matt says at the outset, a waltz. It is also a tale of how our expectations and views of events don't necessarily match what another's expectations and views of the same event are. Our obstacles in this play are not just the current social status of the characters - she's Methodist, wealthy, a spinster and a "liberal", he's older, has a beard, is (gasp!) Jewish and an immigrant - our obstacles are in our pasts, and it is those obstacles that keep us from finding happiness in the present. It is not Freudian, although there is a certain hint of it, but a subtle truth that at some time or other we all must face and dispense with, in order to find our true centres and our true selves. True, the familiar motif of the impact of the past on the present underlies the theme of spiritual isolation making real communication difficult is present in the play, but that does not reduce it to profundity.

Sally's past must come to us as if she has been on the brink of telling it all rather than with overwhelming resistance and shame. Matt is wooing her and drawing it all out of her, like a gentle canoe ride that the boat house setting suggests. Wilson, remembering the wounds, both physical and emotional, that lacerated the fictional Talley family, decided that, for this love story, he "should go all the way and make it the sweet valentine it should be." And it is his love for these characters that ultimately informs the play and our interpretation.

Is Sally's barrenness such a tragic revelation to us 21st century types? Probably not, but it is not hard for us to bring out the empathy, embarrassment and shame that such a situation would bring out in the '40s. For Sally it is a terrible burden
and explains why she feels unable to be wanted by any man. To us, the heart and soul of a woman is revealed with touchingly gentle pain. For Matt's terrible past, his family's torture and death as a result of World War I Europe, we are presented with an altogether more modern theme and one which touches us today, given the current wars in the Middle East. Matt fears marital intimacy would bring with it the expectation of fatherhood. And he sees a world filled with war, not one into which he would bring a child.

I can say honestly I have often thought of that question myself, and most people of a certain generation have – indeed anyone raised with the shadow of total war or the spectre of nuclear annihilation hanging over their heads can certainly relate to Matt's predicament. And once again, after a decade of respite, this question is raised, this time not from a direct threat from any one country, but from the mad and unpredictable actions of terrorists, against which there are no politics, no defense. Like that couple living in the shadow of the Second World War and the holocaust, we too find ourselves wondering what our future can bring and if love and a family can assuage that fear and fill our emptiness. Both Matt and Sally have a strong motivation in their lives to avoid entanglements, and it is the "kismet" of their situations that allow them finally to embrace a future together, and perhaps there is a lesson in this for us today, as well.

Living as we do in an age where people reveal their darkest and most intimate secrets on TV, single women in their thirties are hardly social pariahs, and with interfaith marriages and ten year (or more) age differences hardly raise an eyebrow, Sally and Matt's story may smack of nostalgia, but there's nothing yesteryear about the themes of the play or the ache and emptiness in their (and our) hearts. The underlying themes of prejudice and tolerance, interracial marriage and immigrant integration, are deeply related to modern Europe, and are much in debate at the moment in Holland, as are the wounds of our contemporary wars, where we, still bystanders, wonder what would make us want to bring a new generation into this horror.

**Final Thoughts:**

Directing plays is a lot like listening to the radio when you're heartbroken — suddenly all the songs are about you. Each time I pick up a new script I find myself startled by how much relevance I find. Talley’s Folly is a World War II era tale, told in the post-Vietnam war era, and yet as we meet Matt and Sally today, their story is still modern. It’s about individuals with pointy bits and jagged edges who want to be understood, to be valued and loved, but who fear that exposing their secret selves will lead only to getting stabbed in the soft underbelly. We are all walking wounded; we all want to be valued and loved and are afraid to reveal ourselves. And it is about hope and love in the terrible times one lives in. So, really, it’s about each of us, today.