

FROM FRUSTRATION TO RESTORATION

Frustration. Or rather a “solid block of anger and dismay and alarm and, well, *frustration* I was experiencing at the complacent state of the country after the activism of the ‘60s and the early ‘70s” is what Lanford Wilson pinpoints as being the driving force behind the play in his introduction to *Fifth of July*. He continues, “We had not overcome, we had been overcome, and I didn’t know quite how it had been achieved.”

Indeed, the America of the late 1970s was a completely different country than the one of the decade before. The ‘60s were ushered in with the fight for civil rights: marches, freedom riders, “I have a Dream” and everyday people joining together, standing up for change. As the Civil Rights Movement began to bring about results, Americans began to realize what was possible. And so, as the ‘60s continued, more and more large scale social movements burst forth, focusing not just on race, but on sexuality, gender, class and able-ism to name a few causes.

Meanwhile, the escalation of the Vietnam War in the mid-60s and the constant revelation of wartime horrors led to the emergence of a strong reactionary peace movement. The introduction of the draft in 1969 brought protests to a fever pitch, and the nation erupted.

And yet, by the time Wilson began creating the world of the Talleys in the late 1970s, America was no longer a country of action. As he notes, “The air skillfully had been let out of the bell-bottomed balloon and it had sunk behind some hill, unnoticed. One almost had to admire the beautifully finessed betrayal of the peace movement. America has a way of turning something fine into bunk—or more likely into a buck.”

1975 marked the end of the United States’ 30-year involvement in Vietnam. Not only had the nation suffered its first major defeat, but as more and more classified documents were revealed, it was becoming clearer and clearer that the American government had deceived its people. What had supposedly begun as a Cold War strike against communism had evolved into an attempt to “avoid humiliation.”

Wilson observes, “We knew exactly what it [the war and its motivations] was and didn’t care as long as it was over. But then what often happens in defeat: The country seemed willing to forgive in order to forget and the war was all but forgotten, pushed under the rug.”

And so, Americans turned inward. Gone were the sweeping social movements that questioned government and societal norms and in their place came the gurus, the self-help books, and a constant search for not national, but individual identity and self. The nation had moved into what Tom Wolfe anointed “the decade of me.” Divorce rates skyrocketed, and large religious movements, from fundamental Christianity to Scientology, came to the forefront. At the same time, politics increasingly shifted to the right, paving the way for the trickle-down economics and Reaganism of the ‘80s, only a few years away.

It is in this time of passivity, disillusionment, and “me” that Lanford Wilson stepped up and wrote *Fifth of July*, a play which “would be one of restoration and commitment. Something the country sorely needed.” He sets the play in 1977. A year after the nation’s bicentennial, 1977 was in many ways incredibly indicative of the times as the spring saw former president Nixon finally admitting “Yep, I let the American people down,” current president Jimmy Carter was urgently putting forth an eloquent call for a mass movement to reduce the nation’s dependency on oil, a call that was never answered.

Fifth of July premiered Off-Broadway with Wilson’s Circle Repertory Company in 1978. It was followed by a Broadway production in 1980 starring Christopher Reeve and Swoosie Kurtz. In his 1980 review of the play, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich praised it as “a densely packed yet buoyant outpouring of empathy, poetry and humor, all shaped into a remarkable vision.” Realizing not only the poetic, but also the political potency of the piece, Rich continued “When a writer creates a play like ‘Fifth of July,’ he can be sure of many productions to come.”

—by RACHEL LERNER-LEY
dramaturg

THE WAR IN LEBANON: [WILSON, AMERICA'S HEARTLAND, & THE TALLEY TRILOGY]

With its historic downtown of little brick buildings and gazebos, Lebanon, Missouri—"gateway to the Ozarks"—could be said to exemplify small town living. Meanwhile, other areas of town, such as the Ploger-Moneymaker House, a two-story white clapboard farmhouse built in 1870, harken back to Lebanon's farming origins. Thrown into the mix are the remnants of pure Americana—the motels, diners, and small markets—from when Route 66 ran through town. At the same time, there is the contemporary industrialization that has come more and more to the forefront as Lebanon has become "the aluminum boat capital of the world." This small city of 13,000 is many things all at once.

It is also playwright Lanford Wilson's hometown.

"I was almost surprised when I realized that the play had to be set in my hometown of Lebanon, Missouri," Wilson explains in his introduction to *Fifth*. "This had to be about the heartland." He further expanded upon his impulse in a 1980 *New York Times* article: "You feel there's a key there, if you were just bright enough or good enough, a key that would tell you what this country is really all about."

It is perhaps no surprise then that Wilson set *Fifth* in Lebanon. Nor is it surprising that he has returned to Lebanon, as well as the Ozarks, for several other plays. In fact, Wilson has built an entire trilogy around Lebanon and the Talley family. Originally titled "The War in Lebanon," Wilson created a cycle of plays starting with *Fifth of July* that present an examination of wartime America, each play being set on July 4th during a major American war. The cycle now goes by "The Talley Trilogy."

Talley's Folly, set on July 4, 1944 at the Talley family boathouse, brings Sally together with Matt Friedman, presenting the possibility of hope and joy during a time of destruction. *Talley's Folly* premiered in 1979 and went on to win the 1980 Pulitzer Prize. The final installment of the trilogy *Talley & Son* is also set on July 4, 1944 at the Talley family house and places the losses of war beside the loss of structure within an American family. *Talley & Son* premiered off-Broadway in 1985.

The trilogy begins in the 40s and then jumps 33 years, ending in the 70s. Such a jump mirrors Wilson's own experience of moving away from and then returning home, an experience which made him realize "We change so quickly, we in America." He continues, "I left there [Missouri] thinking it was all so peaceful and pleasant and American, like all those good 1940s American movies. And then I go back and find that half the people in my high school class are divorced, and someone has murdered someone else... And yet all those idyllic values I remember, the warm human values are still there, too, existing in parallel. That's what I mean when I say it's damned complicated."

—by RACHEL LERNER-LEY