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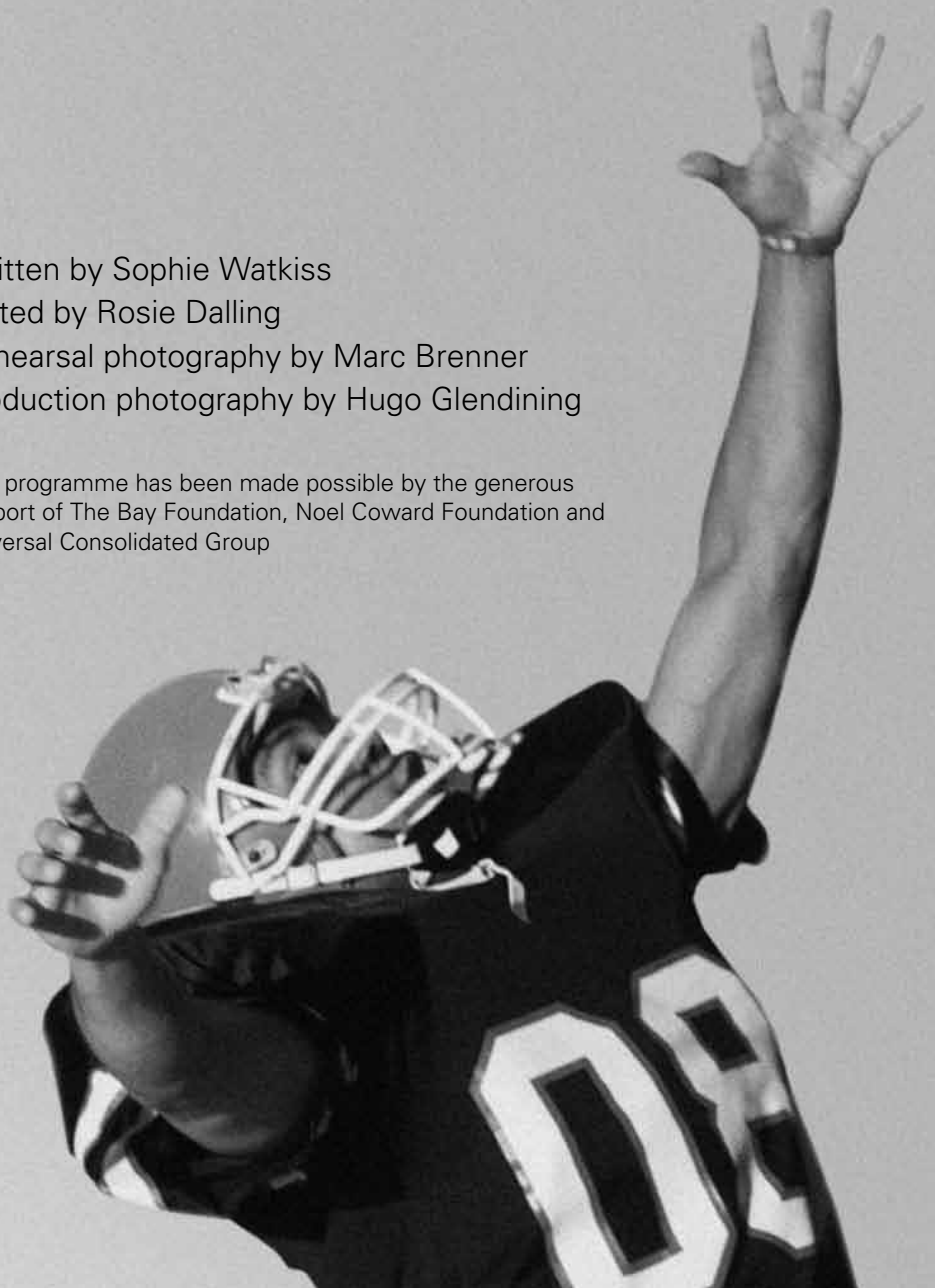
Study Guide for

Serenading Louie

by Lanford Wilson

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Cast and Creative Team

Cast



Charlotte Emmerson: MARY

Theatre: includes *Wallenstein* (Chichester Festival), *On the Rocks* (Hampstead), *The Children's Hour*, *Great Expectations* (Manchester Royal Exchange), *Therese Raquin*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *The Good Hope*, *The Cherry Orchard* (NT), *The Daughter-in-Law* (Watford Palace), *Postman Always Ring Twice* (Playhouse/WYP), *The Seagull* (Edinburgh Festival), *Our Song* (TEG Productions), *Baby Doll* (Birmingham Rep/NT/Albery), *The Crucible* (tour).

Film: includes *The Last Minute*, *Smile*, *Weekend Bird*, *Food of Love*, *Wangle*.

Television: includes *Casualty 1909*, *Berry's Way*, *The Innocent Project*, *Stan*, *See No Evil*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Vincent*, *Outlaws*, *The Brief*, *Foyles War*, *The Alan Clark Diaries*, *Holby City*, *Peak Practise*, *Just Desserts*, *Noah's Ark*, *The Lives and Crimes of William Palmer*, *Underworld*, *Staying Alive*.



Jason Butler Harner: ALEX

Theatre: includes *Our Town*, *The Gingerbread House*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *The Front Page*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Paris Letter*, *Orange Flower Water*, *Hedda Gabler* – Obie Award, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Ruby Sunrise*, *Mr Fox: A Ruminantion*, *Five Flights*, *Hamlet*, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, *The Invention of Love*, *An Experiment with an Air Pump*, *Galileo*, *Crimes of the Heart*, *Juno & the Paycock*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, *The Beauty Queen of Leeanne*, *Macbeth*, *Henry VIII*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Arcadia*, *Twelfth Night* (New York).

Film: includes *The Irishman*, *The Extra Man*, *Taking of Pelham 1 2 3*, *Changeling*, *John Adams*, *New Orleans Mon Amour*, *Next*, *The Good Shepherd*.

Television: includes *The Good Wife*, *Mercy*, *Fringe*, *Law & Order*, *The Closer*, *Hope & Faith*.



Jason O'Mara: CARL

Theatre: includes *The Homecoming* (Gate, Dublin/New York/Comedy), *Bash* (Gate, Dublin), *Jew of Malta* (Almeida), *School for Scandal* (RSC), *Popcorn* (Apollo), *What the Butler Saw*, *Absent Friends*, *Romeo and Juliet* (Harrogate), *Strangers on a Train* (Chester Gateway), *Hamlet* (Second Age, Dublin), *The Man who became a Legend* (Peacock, Dublin).

Television: includes *Life on Mars – USA*, *Trust Me*, *The Closer*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Men in Trees*, *Marlowe*, *Criminal Minds*, *Drift*, *In Justice*, *Countdown*, *CSI Miami*, *The Agency*, *Eastwick*, *High Stakes*, *Monarch of the Glen*, *Band of Brothers*, *Playing the Field*, *The Mrs Bradley Mysteries*.

Film: includes *Resident Evil: Extinction*.



Geraldine Somerville: GABRIELLE

Theatre: includes *Power*, *Remember This*, *Blue Remembered Hills* (NT), *I Am Yours*, *The Treatment*, *3 Birds Alighting on a Field*, *A Jamaican Airman Foresees his Death* (Royal Court), *A Doll's House* (Birmingham Rep), *Romeo and Juliet* (Bristol Old Vic), *Lady Audley's Secret* (Lyric Hammersmith), *The Glass Menagerie* (Royal Exchange), *More than the One Antoinette* (Young Vic).

Film: includes *Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix*, *Sixty-Six*, *Harry Potter & the Goblet of Fire*, *Gosford Park*, *Harry Potter & the Sorcerers Stone*, *Harry Potter & the Chamber of Secrets*, *Rough Auntie*, *Jilting Joe*, *True Blue*, *Haunted*, *Augustine*, *Bathing Elizabeth*.

Television: includes *Survivors*, *The Children*, *Daphne*, *Inspector Lynley*, *Jericho*, *Murder in Mind*, *The Safe House*, *Daylight Robbery*, *The Aristocrats*, *Heaven on Earth*, *After Miss Julie*, *Cracker*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *Poirot*, *The Black Velvet Gown*.



Creative Team



Lanford Wilson. Playwright

Plays: include *Rain Dance*, *Book of Days*, *Sympathetic Magic*, *Redwood Curtain*, *Burn This*, *Angels Fall*, *Talley & Son*, *Talley's Folly* – New York Drama Critics' Circle Award & Pulitzer prize for Drama, *5th of July*, *The Mound Builders*, *The Hot I Baltimore* – New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, *Lemon Sky*, *Serenading Louie*, *The Gingham Dog*, *The Rimers of Eldritch*, *Balm in Gilead*.

He has also written the libretto for Lee Hoiby's opera of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* and a new translation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

For television: *Taxi!*, *The Migrants* (from a story by Tennessee Williams).

Wilson is one of the founding members of the circle repertory company in New York City and was a resident playwright there from 1969-1995.

Simon Curtis. Director

Theatre: includes *Otherwise Engaged* (Criterion), *Dinner with Friends* (Hampstead), *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice 1993* (Steppenwolf – Chicago/Broadway), *Road* (Royal Court/New York), *Making History*, *Roots* (NT), *A Lie of the Mind*, *Ourselves Alone* (Royal Court).

Television: Executive Producer of over 50 productions for the BBC including *After Miss Julie*, *Shooting the Past*, *The Absence of War*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Virgin Queen*.

As director: includes *Cranford*, *A Short Stay in Switzerland*, *David Copperfield*, *The Student Prince*, *Five Days* (HBO), *Freezing*, *Twenty Thousand Streets Under the Sky*.

Peter McKintosh. DESIGNER

For the Donmar: *Be Near Me*, *The Chalk Garden*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *The Cryptogram*, *Boston Marriage*.

Theatre: includes *The 39 Steps* (London/New York/Israel/Italy/Australia/Korea/China/Russia/Japan/US & UK tours), *Prick Up Your Ears*, *Donkey's Years*, *The Home Place* (Comedy), *Hello Dolly!* (Regents Park), *Apologia* (Bush), *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *The Dumb Waiter* (Trafalgar Studios), *Fiddler on the Roof* (Savoy), *Kirikou et Karaba* (Paris), *Summer and Smoke* (Apollo), *The Birthday Party* (Duchess), *A Woman of No Importance* (Haymarket), *King John*, *Brand*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Pericles*, *Alice in Wonderland* (RSC), *Honk!*, *Widowers' Houses* (NT), *Waste*, *Cloud Nine*, *Romance* (Almeida), *The Home Place* (Gate Dublin), *Honk!* (UK tour/Boston/Chicago/Tokyo/Singapore), *The Scarlet Letter*, *Just So*, *Pal Joey* (Chichester Festival), *The Black Dahlia* (Yale Repertory Company), *Romeo & Juliet* (Washington DC).

Opera: includes *The Handmaid's Tale* (Royal Danish Opera/ENO/Canadian Opera), *Love Counts*, *The Silent Twins* (Almeida Opera).

Dance: *Cut to the Chase* (English National Ballet).

Guy Hoare. Lighting Designer

For the Donmar: *Be Near Me.*

Theatre: includes *Othello* (Trafalgar Studios), *Waste* (Almeida), *Amadeus*, *Assassins*, *The Little Fir Tree*, *Fen*, *Far Away*, *Macbeth* (Sheffield Theatres), *A Christmas Carol*, *The Lion*, *The Witch and The Wardrobe* (Birmingham Rep), *Bollywood Jane*, *Macbeth*, *How Many Miles to Basra?* (WYP), *Kes*, *Season's Greetings* (Liverpool Playhouse), *Of Mice and Men* (Mercury, Colchester), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Clwyd Theatr Cymru), *Zero Degrees and Drifting*, *Could It Be Magic?* (Unlimited), *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (Pleasance), *Accidental Heroes* (Lyric Hammersmith), *The Witches of Eastwick*, *All The Fun of The Fair*, *Aspects of Love Old Times*, *Frozen*, *Love in the Title*, *The Caretaker*, *Closer*, *Look Back In Anger* (UK tours).

Opera: includes *The Cunning Little Vixen* (Brno National Theatre), *The Magic Flute*, *Katy Kabanova*, *Don Giovanni*, *Anna Bolena*, *Susannah*, *The Seraglio*, *Eugene Onegin* (English Touring Opera), *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Tosca*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Ring Cycle* (Longborough Festival Opera).

Dance: includes *Havana Rakatan* (Sadler's Wells), *Mischief* (Theatre Rites), *And Who Shall Come To The Ball?* (Candoco), *The Land of Yes*, *The Land of No*, *Square Map of Q4* (Bonachela Dance Company), *Bruise Blood* (Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company), *No More Ghosts* (Richard Alston Dance Company), *About Around* (bgroup).

Adam Cork. Composer & Sound Designer

For the Donmar: *Red*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Hamlet* (also New York), *Madame de Sade*, *Ivanov*, *Creditors*, *The Chalk Garden*, *Othello*, *John Gabriel Borkman*, *Don Juan in Soho*, *Frost/Nixon* (also Gielgud/New York/US tour), *The Cut*, *The Wild Duck*, *Henry IV*, *Caligula*.

Theatre: includes *Enron* (Chichester/Royal Court/Noel Coward), *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Phedre*, *Time & The Conways* (NT), *A View from the Bridge*, *No Man's Land* (Duke of York's), *Macbeth* (New York), *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Don Carlos* (Gielgud), *The Tempest*, *Speaking like Magpies* (RSC), *The Glass Menagerie* (Apollo), *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, *The Late Henry Moss* (Almeida), *Suddenly Last Summer* (Albery).

Film: includes *Bust*, *Tripletake*.

TV: includes *Frances Tuesday*, *Re-ignited*, *Imprints*.

Radio: includes *Losing Rosalind*, *The Luneberg Variation*, *The Colonel-Bird*, *Don Carlos*, *Othello*, *On the Ceiling*.

Lanford Wilson and a New American Theatre

Off-Off Broadway

“I can’t believe the energy we had then...It was all very intense and exciting. There was a kind of independent collective Off-Off Broadway: if one of us discovered something it belonged to everyone...I felt like we were what the impressionists must have been.”

Lanford Wilson¹

The story of Lanford Wilson’s playwriting career is intrinsically linked to the explosion of a New American Theatre; he has been widely acknowledged for his contributions to the rise and success of Off-Off Broadway theatre as a legitimate venue for American drama.

Off-Off Broadway theatre began in 1960s America. It emerged from dissatisfaction with both the profit-making theatre of Broadway and New York’s less commercially oriented, but commercially influenced, Off-Broadway theatre. This generation of playwrights, to which Lanford Wilson belongs, were part of a cultural transition from conservative 1950s America to a more radical, upbeat 1960s:

The United States moved from the cultural straitjacket of the Eisenhower age, with its McCarthyism, cold war, and start of the arms race, to the innovative Kennedy programs: the Peace Corps, space exploration, and the young president’s support of the arts. Other changes “blowing in the wind” were the civil rights movement, the growing protest against the Vietnam War, the advent of rock ‘n’ roll, and the expansion of mass-media communication.

**David A. Crespy,
Playwright and author, *Off-Off Broadway Explosion*²**

Caffe Cino

Lanford Wilson’s career, which spans over fifty years, began at the Café Cino; he is the author of the venue’s most celebrated production, *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964). Caffe Cino was opened in 1958 in Greenwich Village by a young, out of work dancer, Joseph Cino. It is credited as the venue that created Off-Off Broadway where some of the most inventive playwrights of the 1960s learnt their craft, including Tom Egan, Paul Foster, John Guare, Robert Heide, William Hoffman, Lee Kalcheim, Harry Koutoukas, Robert Patrick, David Starkweather, Sam Shepard, Doric Wilson and, of course, Lanford Wilson. These playwrights produced and acted in their own and each other’s plays and helped to run the venue, which included working as the venue’s waiters. They worked in close collaboration with Joe himself. “Do what you have to do” was his motto. The rest of the Off-Off Broadway movement sprung directly from this experiment.



The Cino was a playwrights' theatre; the miniscule size of the stage limited the actors' ability to move on it and possibilities for design were minimal, so the work performed on it took shape from the written word. Robert Heide described putting on plays in the space as making use of "magic stage dust", referring to the glitter and incongruities of the Cino's tiny stage in relation to the huge passions of the artists' work.³

The beginning of the Cino's demise came in 1965, when the venue was devastated by fire. Although it re-opened and survived another two years, Joe Cino ended his own life aged thirty-four in April 1967. The Cino community tried to keep the café open, but, without its founder, it had lost its soul, and finally closed in 1968.

"Everyone – except Joe – knew that he was creating a new theatre in America. His excitement was responsible for half of the vitality of Off-Off Broadway, and his death heralded the end of free activity. After Joe died, Off-Off Broadway got less communal, more competitive."

Lanford Wilson⁴

From La Mama Experimental Club to the Cherry Lane Theatre

In 1965 Lanford Wilson had his first play staged at another legendary Off-Off Broadway venue, Ellen Stewart's La Mama Experimental Club (La Mama). The play, *Balm in Gilead*, which depicted the 1960s night world in a section of Manhattan, couldn't be produced on the Cino's small stage because it had a cast of thirty six actors.

Unlike Joe Cino, who spurned media attention, Ellen Stewart actively sought publicity because she knew it would help her playwrights' careers. However, the reality was that the runs at La Mama were short, and by the time critics from the daily newspapers made their way to the venue, the production had often already closed. The only plays guaranteed to receive reviews were the ones that transferred to legitimate Off-Broadway houses, such as Lanford Wilson's *Home Free*, which moved to the Cherry Lane Theatre.

The experience of moving from La Mama to the Off-Broadway setting of the Cherry Lane was positive, yet unsettling, for writers such as Wilson. Whilst they were being paid for their productions, there was a loss of artistic control over their work. At La Mama, the playwright was involved in all areas of production, from casting to design; at the Cherry Lane, this responsibility was the remit of the director and producer. Subsequently, actors who had created roles and worked with a playwright at La Mama didn't automatically get to play those roles in the transfer to the Cherry Lane. The Cherry Lane also lacked the intimacy of La Mama, and therefore the quality of experience for the audience was lessened. As soon as writers such as Wilson completed a run at the Cherry Lane, they returned to La Mama and the artistic freedom that it allowed them.

Despite La Mama now being Wilson's artistic home, it soon became clear that he was heading uptown for a successful professional career: his plays *Ludlow Fair* and *The Madness of Lady Bright* moved to the Off-Broadway Theatre East in 1966, receiving good reviews in *The New York Times*. This was followed the same year with the transfer of *Rimer's of Eldritch* from La Mama to the Cherry Lane.

The Circle Repertory Theatre

Wilson is renowned for the long-term artistic partnership he has forged with the director Marshall Mason, whom he met at Café Cino and who has staged many of his plays from the 1960s to the present day. Together they went on to found the Circle Repertory in 1969, along with Rob Thirkfield and Tanya Berezin, which emulated the principles of the Cino in its ambitions for artistic freedom for playwrights.⁵ The theatre became Wilson's New York base, and gave him a virtually guaranteed outlet for his work. From here, he took one step further to Broadway, thus experiencing the range of American Theatre from Off-Off Broadway, through to Broadway itself.

The style of Lanford Wilson's work

“Going out with Lanford, having lunch or dinner with him, standing on the street, you can see him hearing the music of people’s language and registering it in his computer ear. He is constantly aware of the sounds going on around him.”

Tanya Berezin⁶

“I’m trying to record my contemporary history, where we are and what I see around me today...I want people to see – and to read – my plays and say, ‘this is what it was like living in that place at that time. People haven’t changed a damn bit. We can recognize everyone!’”

Lanford Wilson⁷

During the 1960s Wilson established his reputation as a playwright whose original use of language created a style of poetic realism – the means by which even the most ordinary, every day speech is engineered into emotionally translucent poetry. Over the decades, he has become renowned for his ability to adapt the language of his plays to the time.

An analysis of Wilson’s canon to date reveals several recurrent themes: the need to retain a sense of self worth; the importance of personal history and the preservation of the past; and the necessity for familial support – surrogate or otherwise.

Wilson has created a very individual style of writing, with honesty acting as the driving force behind his work. His plays are primarily based on his own life experiences. What is evident from seeing his plays in performance is his ability to recreate situations that are wholly realistic, almost documentary like, while at the same time raising them above mere realism to a level of poetic drama. This is achieved through his absolute mastery of dramatic language, from creating character with a few skilful lines to capturing the tone and cadence of everyday speech. Another trait is his ability to write powerfully revealing monologues. He himself acknowledges that in his writing he wants to “lift ordinary speech and dance it just a little.”⁸

Wilson’s work is often compared with that of Chekhov; both playwrights share a concern for the minutiae of daily life, portraying characters whose lives are shaped by their environment, and where there is a shared emphasis on the importance of work in their characters’ lives. Mason, who has directed much of Wilson’s work, sees Wilson as “America’s contemporary Chekhov”. Mason supports his view by pointing out the stylistic traits of Wilson’s work which align him with Chekhov: “There is much indirect action: he doesn’t do a lot in way of plot. His work is nearly all character interaction, which is very Chekhovian.”⁹

An introduction to SERENADING LOUIE

“I go back and find that half the people in my high school class are divorced, and someone has murdered someone else, and so and so is cheating on such and such, and Marylou has just killed her baby, and one of my best friends is now an incredible alcoholic, and the guy least likely to succeed is now practically the mayor...yet all those idyllic values I remember, the warm human values, are still there too, existing in parallel...it’s damned complicated.”

Lanford Wilson¹⁰

SERENADING LOUIE is a play about marriage, the fading of ideals, the destruction of dreams and the dying of passion and purpose. It is a disturbing work, with a deeply shocking denouement. The play is set north of Chicago in the early 1970s, and focuses on the lives of two couples; Alex and Gabrielle (Gabby), and Carl and Mary – they are from a more affluent social stratum than is usual for Wilson’s characters. Alex, Carl and Mary met when they were at the Northwestern University ten years earlier. Memories of university times, and the people they were then, permeate the play as the couples reflect longingly on a seemingly idyllic past. Even though both couples appear to be enjoying social and professional success, the play is imbued with frustration and discontent.





Wilson derives the title of his play from the lyrics of 'The Whiffenpoof Song', recalled by the characters from their university days and cited in the play's epigraph:

We will serenade our Louie
While life and voice shall last
Then we'll pass and be forgotten with the rest

The tone of regret from these lyrics infuse the play as the lives and relationships of the four characters disintegrate before our eyes. Christopher Bigsby sees Wilson anticipating what Tom Wolfe later termed the 'me decade', suggesting a culture of narcissism, 'the price to be paid for the collapse of a sense of community and the validation of self-concern.'¹¹

SERENADING LOUIE was first staged at the Washington Theatre Club in 1970 and was later revised for a production by the Circle Repertory Company, New York, in May 1976. This is generally recognized as the official premiere, since it is this version that was published. After further minor revisions by Wilson, the play was revived at the Public Theatre in New York in February 1984.

The quartet of characters

Alex and Gabby

Alex is a successful lawyer with political ambitions: he is about to be nominated to run for a seat in Congress. Despite his outward achievements, he appears to be falling apart, suggested by his symbolic toothache and the story about his beautiful fountain pen, which had been his grandfather's, leaking all over him in the middle of a court trial. We learn a lot about the inner frustrations his pressured lifestyle imposes on him when he talks to Carl in Act One, Scene Five: "I keep feeling my real life will begin any day now. This can't be it. This is just temporary. A dry run." As the play unfolds, Alex's infatuation with a seventeen year old girl, through whom he tries to live vicariously, is revealed.

The relationship between Alex and his wife Gabby is fractured. As Gabby welcomes Alex home from work at the opening of Act One, Scene Three, the stage directions read: 'Alex looks to the living room; seeing her, he shows the barest recognition.' They are two people existing in the same space, yet are unconnected. The dysfunctional nature of the relationship is impacting on Gabby emotionally, as she says during the scene:

GABBY ...I get so jumpy at every little thing lately. I feel so inse...
Oh, it's silly, isn't it? (Pause). I don't know how to react to
these moods you get into lately.

A sense of fragmentation is reflected in these broken sentences and tentative thoughts that characterise her speech patterns: she wants something else, and, until the end of the play, is so incapable of articulating her desires that she speaks almost entirely in unfinished sentences. She is losing her husband, and is desperate to find out why and to get him back, emotionally and physically. For Gabby, the frosted leaf that she once picked up as a child can be seen to be a metaphor for her life: intending to give the leaf to her teacher to pin up on the wall, she was unaware that the very act of putting it in her bag would destroy the beauty she sought to capture.



Mary and Carl

Mary and Carl were the darlings of their university peer group; Carl was a football legend at Northwestern, who went into the army after college and saw active service in Vietnam, and Mary was the 'homecoming queen'. They have a young daughter, Ellen, who, although a focus of the couple's attention in the scenes between them, is never seen.

Carl is now an unstoppably successful real estate developer, yet he can no longer find satisfaction in pursuing his high-powered entrepreneurial career. On a personal level, he is paralysed by inertia over the affair that he knows Mary is having. As he explains to Alex, he sees the affair like he sees everything else: "like I'm up in the air and it's down on the ground happening to someone else. It doesn't affect me." This inertia manifests itself in ill-health – he hasn't felt well for a while and suffers from headaches. Carl's inner conflicts stem not only from the personal aspects of his life, but also from what he sees as the endemic disintegration of society – a recurrent theme in Lanford Wilson's work:

CARL The whole country's profiteering and pickpocketing each other; it's a daisy chain. That's what business amounts to. We're all telling each other every minute how important all the things we believe in are, how the world would collapse if we let up for a minute believing all the things we believe and doing all the things we do and, hell, nobody believes it. We all know it's a shell game. It strains all our faculties keeping all the lies straight and juggling all the rationalizations and pretending we don't notice everyone struggling with it...

SERENADING LOUIE, Act One, Scene Five

This scene drives forward to a frenzied climax as Carl rages against his inability to respond to Mary's affair:

CARL WHAT'S SHE TRYING TO DO? I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FEEL, ALEX. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FEEL. I WANT IT BACK — LIKE IT WAS. IT WAS GOOD THEN.

SERENADING LOUIE, Act One, Scene Five

Carl's reflection back to the supposed golden past, as cited in this quotation, lies at the heart of play: the expectations of youth have not been fulfilled; the American Dream has disintegrated into a personal nightmare. Similarly, Mary's retreat into a supposedly happier past only leaves her more disoriented: remembering her fond feelings for Carl during their undergraduate courtship, she says "I don't think I loved him then. But I love him then now."

It is implied that religion was once important to Carl, and that he stills prays regularly. He also believes in the apocalypse: "When the sky suddenly splits open one day and angels sing – you look up and say – thank God, I kept up my praying". Ultimately, his religious faith has not given him any answers, and, foreshadowing his violent actions at the end of the play he warns, "it's all got to break."

Inside the rehearsal room

“Everyone I talk to about SERENADING LOUIE thinks it’s a new play, because they haven’t come across it before. That’s going to be the joy of this Donmar production; the audiences will be coming to it fresh, as if it is a piece of new writing – there won’t be the preconceptions you usually get with a revival, no fixed ideas of how it should be staged.”

**Michael Grandage,
Artistic Director, Donmar**

Design concept

Designer Peter McKintosh has made the creative decision to locate the setting for the Donmar’s production of SERENADING LOUIE firmly in the 1960s, with furniture and fixtures from this period. This decision has been arrived at because, although Wilson sets the piece in 1970, it is deemed that the house would have been furnished during the 1960s. It will give the set a ‘feel’ when the audience first arrive, offering a context. Another way of contextualising the period will be the reflection of images from the television onto the back wall, suggesting a sense of geography and history. For example, the National Anthem, which used to be played at the end of transmission on American television stations, will be accompanied with seminal images of America; there will be some period weather footage from a local Chicago station and national news footage offering an authentic flavour of the time.

What excited Peter when he first read the play was seeing all four characters in the space simultaneously, and then discovering that they were inhabiting different worlds. So, key to his design is the concept that the single living room set serves as the home for both couples. To create this effect, Peter is working closely with lighting designer Guy Hoare to delineate the shifts in action from one household to the other.

The action takes place between late October and early November; by Act Two, Halloween has just passed. The characters are haunted by their present unfulfilled lives, in juxtaposition with happier spirits from the past. A decorative touch suggested by Wilson in the setting is a shadow puppet on the wall, perhaps hinting that the characters are manipulated by some external force. A reminder of Halloween is offered by the plastic mask of a bull that Carl produces, which he wore when he went ‘trick-or-treating’ with Ellen, who wore a calf’s mask. Mary reminds Carl that she was born under the sign of Taurus, the bull. That the bull and calf are both animals of sacrifice subtly foreshadows the violence perpetrated by Carl towards his wife and daughter at the end of the play.

Week three of rehearsals: a conversation with Ben Woolf, Associate Director.

What research did the cast and creative team undertake prior to rehearsals?

We did quite a surprising amount of research. You'd think that being English in 2010 wouldn't be so different from being American in 1971, but the more we delved into it, the more we realised that this play relies upon a very different time and location and we really had to wrap our heads around this. It was amazing how distant this time seemed; the experiences and social mores of these characters are so different from our own. We researched a lot about Watergate, Nixon, Vietnam, Kennedy and the student strikes of the 1970s, because they are all referred to in the play and inform the political environment that it exists in. It's curious because the play is set in 1971, but refers to events that happen in 1972 and 1973, so Lanford Wilson has clearly allowed the play a slight looseness.



Can you talk me through the process of rehearsals so far?

The first thing we did was have a read through; the remainder of the first week was spent doing table work – discussing scenes and characters, exploring where we felt each scene wanted to go and asking questions about the play. The second week we got out of our seats to try and find ways that the play could exist physically, working on some very loose, sketchy ideas. Towards the end of that week we went back to the scenes and were more rigorous with them, pulling them apart. We are now three and half weeks in and we've repeated this process with nearly all the scenes.

In SERANADING LOUIE, surface naturalism is quickly dissipated by recurring theatrical elements such as direct address to the audience, overlapping dialogue, and the two couples sharing the same stage space. What impact have these stylistic elements had on the rehearsal process so far?

It's made it very complicated in a lot of ways, because we've had to work out what it is that is actually happening; an actor can't play something that is stylistic – they have to find a real motive to do things. We've had to be very clear that we aren't doing something generalised. Where possible, we are trying to approach everything as if we were doing a naturalistic play, and let those stylistic elements happen at the same time. Something Lanford has advised us to do is to let each moment of the play work independently. For example, the asides are all very different – sometimes the other actors on stage can hear them, and sometimes they can't. We haven't written a rule book about the play's conventions – sometimes the characters see each other on stage when they are in different spaces, sometimes they don't. We've just tried to let each moment breathe as well as possible.

Lanford Wilson acknowledges that in his writing he wants to "lift ordinary speech and dance it just a little." What discoveries have been made about his language through the rehearsal process?

Lanford takes a strange spin on quite clichéd expressions, for instance, some phrase that you have heard lots of times before suddenly shines in a different way than you would have imagined. It makes you think, 'wow, so this is what that phrase means', or it sounds like a different version of a phrase that is usually said. Also, there is a reality to the way he involves a character directly in a scene by the things he makes them *not* say. There is a murkiness when you really start exploring the timelines of the characters based on what they say, but we realised that this is absolutely what happens in real life. For instance, there is a scene at the opening of Act Two where the characters talk about their time at university. We've discovered that the timeline doesn't quite work out, and whether that is intentional or not, we don't know. But there's nothing unusual about it; if you were to record a group of students talking about their experiences ten years later, they would all have false memories as well, and it's that kind of slip in consciousness – in the language as well – that defines the play. The play exists so much in the past; there is a sense with all the characters that they are trapped in a past that they can't get out of, and it's interesting that these pasts are false in a way – they are certainly not as concrete as the characters think they are.

That is one of the main ideas contained within the play, isn't it, how the past informs the present. Lanford Wilson has provided a substantial 'backstory' for each character, particularly in relation to how Alex, Carl and Mary met at university. How has this informed the way the cast are developing their relationships with one another?

Quite a lot. They are assessing how they met and how their relationships were established. It's been at the heart of the rehearsal process; a lot of our conversations have been about what the characters used to be like, or what they wanted to be like. For example, Carl's character is informed clearly from his experiences in Vietnam. When he established his relationship with Mary after coming home from the war, they were both the charismatic, glamorous stars of their university, as Mary says, 'he was the returning star and I was the returning homecoming queen.' Alex, who is kicking against his relationship with Gabby, says to her 'perhaps we met too young.' The past is absolutely relevant.

What other main ideas have emerged from rehearsals so far. Have any of these taken you by surprise as a company?

We have been genuinely surprised at how different the characters' lives are to our own. It's been very interesting to make sure that we shift our own head-space, creatively, not to use the language of our own cultural references. And it's interesting to realise that they aren't 'hippies'; they are not part of that big movement – they are very different from that, they are children of the 1950s, and that was a big discovery for us. These characters only work when you realise that they are from a whole different era.

You are three and half weeks into the rehearsal process. Is there any particular aspect of the production that the director, Simon Curtis, is keen to focus on at this moment in time?

The lights! Because the characters exist in one space which operates as two different houses, the locations have to make sense – and we are making simple choices in our staging, ensuring that the two houses work together and that the two timelines make sense. We are also collaborating with Penny Dyer, our dialect coach, who is working with all the actors who aren't American – so that's everyone except Jason Butler Harner! They are such enormous, toweringly difficult characters to play in many ways. We've discovered that you really have to give the play some attack to bring it up to pace just to rehearse it; it needs a drive to it. It's really hard just to 'drop in' to one scene that you want to work on – which is difficult to manage in a rehearsal situation, because most of the scenes are fairly lengthy. It's been very helpful to stand back and build up to it. The lines reveal themselves in a different way when you start playing them out at some pace, with confidence and attack.

Is there anything else that you would like to share about the rehearsal process so far?

It's interesting how roughly and organically the play operates. A lot of plays are defined very clearly by rules; there is a tension that makes them work. What is amazing about this play is that there is a 'messiness' to it, which makes it feel real and ultimately very unsettling and unnerving. For instance, although one of each couple is having an affair, they are not 'opposite' couples; their stories are not dealing with the same themes, but they are permitted to overlap and co-exist by the playwright.

Practical work

ACT ONE

Chicago 1970. Early Evening.

The living room of a suburban home, north of Chicago.

A door to a kitchen, through which is the garage, at least one set of French doors leading to an outside area, a window seat, and a door to the master bedroom. Stairs up to the child's room. Spacious and expensive, modern or traditional. American antique furniture eighteenth or early nineteenth century and good. There is a rather fierce decorative Balinese shadow puppet on one wall. This one set, which should look like a home, not a unit set, will serve as the home of the first one couple, then the other, with no alterations between.

Lighting from actual source, or the illusion of such. The divisions between scenes in the first act should be marked with an abrupt blackout. At the end of the scene, blackness, followed by lights up full in as short a time as possible — no more than, say, ten seconds.

Scene One:

(After midnight. The silent TV plays the last few bars of the National Anthem then shows only snow, the only light in the room. GABRIELLE opens the bedroom door, standing in the light of the door, in her nightgown, holding a pillow in her arms.)

GABRIELLE Alex? Are you here? Alex?

ALEX Yes.

GABRIELLE Were you asleep?

ALEX No, that's all right. *(Turns off TV. The only light comes from the bedroom door.)*

GABRIELLE Honey . . . ?

ALEX Oh, God.

GABRIELLE What's wrong?

ALEX When you get into that tone of voice and say honey like that, I know we're up for the night.

GABRIELLE No, we aren't . . . I . . . *(Pause.)*

ALEX What, Gabby? *(Pause.)* What, I'm sorry.

GABRIELLE Nothing. What can I say? . . . Nothing . . . *(Goes back to the bedroom, closing the door, effecting a blackout.)*

ALEX I said I'm sorry. *(He opens the door, stands there.)*

GABRIELLE *(Off.)* No, nothing.

ALEX Gabby? *(Pause.)* Gabby, baby, I'm sorry, what? *(Pause.)* Gabby? *(He goes into the bedroom, closing the door, blackout.)*

Scene Two:

(Nearly evening. The only light is on the desk.)

CARL *(Coming from the kitchen as he closes the outside door, he calls from offstage.)* Sweetheart? *(He enters.)* Honey? . . . Mary . . . ? *(He yells up the stairs.)* Hey, baby? *(He goes to the patio door, yells out.)* Mary? *(He shuts the door, turns, and sees the light — he goes to the desk, picks up a note, and sits as he reads it. He lets the note float from this hand back to the desk, shuts his eyes a moment, reaches to the desk lamp, and turns it off. Blackout.)*

Read through the opening scenes from SERENADING LOUIE reproduced here. Consider the following questions as you experiment with staging the scenes:

- What do you think the actors playing Alex and Gabrielle would want to establish about their characters, and their relationship with each other, in Scene One? What are their objectives in the scene?
- As a director, what would you like to establish about Carl's character in Scene Two? What advice would you give the actor playing the scene? What expectation would you want to set up about Mary's character and her relationship with Carl during the staging of the scene?
- Consider the two scenes together. What do they establish about the play's setting? What elements of lighting and design would you consider for staging the two scenes?



Bibliography and endnotes

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SERENADING LOUIE by Lanford Wilson, rehearsal script, Donmar Warehouse 2010.

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- 3 Robert Heide cited in *ibid*, p.34
- 4 Lanford Wilson cited in Anne M. Dean, p. 20.
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- 6 Bezerin, interview with the author, cited in Anne M. Dean, p.46.
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The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate not for profit 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 35 Olivier Awards, 23 Critics' Circle Awards, 19 Evening Standard Awards and 11 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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