



Wilson, Doric (1939-2011)

by Brandon Hayes

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A portrait of Doric Wilson
by Robert Giard.
Courtesy Doric Wilson.

A pioneer in the development of contemporary gay theater, Doric Wilson was instrumental in Off-Off-Broadway theater in New York City from the early 1960s through the 1980s. Wilson used theater as a means of anatomizing the lives of gay New Yorkers, particularly gay men, and to motivate his audiences toward activism. His most famous play, *Street Theater* (1981), is a heartfelt depiction of the Stonewall riots, in which Wilson took part.

Wilson was born in Los Angeles on February 24, 1939. He was raised on his grandfather's ranch in Washington state. He attended high school in Kennewick, Washington, where he came out in the 1950s. He ever since lived as an out gay man.

Wilson trained for a short time in the Drama Department at the University of Washington. He was asked to leave the university in 1958 after he protested anti-gay harassment at a local park.

Wilson moved to New York City in 1958, where, under the mentorship of producer Richard Barr, he became active in the burgeoning Off-Off-Broadway theater scene. Along with Sam Shepard and Lanford Wilson, he was involved in Caffe Cino, a coffee shop and theatrical space owned by producer Joe Cino. In 1961, Wilson's first major play, *And He Made a Her*, opened at Caffe Cino.

Wilson became a founding member of Circle Repertory Theatre and the Barr/Wilder/Albee Playwright's Unit. In 1974, he (along with Billy Blackwell, Peter del Valle, and John McSpadden) founded TOSOS (The Other Side of Silence), a seminal theater company of the 1970s and among the first to spotlight gay-themed plays written for gay audiences. In 2001, Wilson resurrected TOSOS as TOSOS II, subsequently winning acclaim for a revival of *Street Theater*.

Street Theater, Wilson's best-known play, is a fictionalization of the Stonewall riots, an event in which Wilson took part. Using satire and exaggeration, Wilson recreates the milieu of street culture in Greenwich Village in the late 1960s, presenting characters variously described as "heavy leather, keys left," "a flower child," and "a street queen." The characters are archetypes representing both the disparate groups involved in the riot and also real people Wilson knew. A complex parody of Wilder's *Our Town* and Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, the play is both deeply literary and deeply rooted in a particular time and place.

Street Theater is paradigmatic of Wilson's dramatization of the gay world in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. From the beginning of his career, Wilson presented the lives of gay characters unapologetically, often satirically but always sympathetically. Unlike other playwrights of the time, he never compromised his depictions of homosexuality and homosexuals to protect the sensibilities of a predominantly heterosexual audience. Indeed, he has always written from the assumption that his audience is composed primarily of fellow homosexuals; and informing all of his work is an awareness of the political consequences of something as basic and elemental as love and desire.

Like many satirists, Wilson targeted the foibles and more serious failures and hypocrisies of the

environment he recreates, in his case, New York gay men at a pivotal time in glbtq history. His plays are farcical and satirical, yet, as Tish Dace has pointed out, "underlying his often caustic comedy is a surprisingly romantic sensibility."

The plays are also more firmly rooted in the queer literary tradition than may be apparent at first glance. *Now She Dances!* (1975), for example, bears a complicated relationship to Wilde's *Salomé*, as translated by Lord Alfred Douglas. It both parodies decadence and pays homage to Wilde's suffering.

An active participant in the early gay liberation movement, Wilson was a member of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). He helped support himself as a bartender and manager of several bars and clubs that sprouted up in the wake of Stonewall, including such institutions as Spike, Ty's, and Brothers & Sisters Cabaret. Wilson's activism and his thorough immersion in New York's gay community are reflected significantly in his work.

The West Street Gang (1977), which is subtitled "a polemical satire in two acts," takes place entirely in a gay bar (and was first produced in a gay bar). Although its ensemble cast of urban characters resembles those in Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead*, *The West Street Gang* focuses exclusively on gay concerns. In addition to representing the milieu of a gay bar of the era, the play explores the ramifications of a gaybashing and includes a character named Bnita Aryant, a reference to 1970s anti-gay activist Anita Bryant (a revised version of the play, updated for the new millennium, allows for the substitution of anti-gay radio personality, Dr. Laura Schlessinger).

Wilson's activist sensibility is equally obvious in *Street Theater*. Near the end of the play a closeted policeman, full of self-hate, exclaims, "You faggots are revolting!!!" Caught up in the exhilaration of Stonewall, a suddenly enlightened "dirty old man" responds, with joy and pride, "You bet your sweet ass we are!"

Wilson's most often performed plays were written in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They include *Now She Dances!* (1975, although an earlier version premiered in 1961), *The West Street Gang* (1977), *A Perfect Relationship* (1979), *Forever After* (1980), and *Street Theater* (1981).

Wilson essentially ceased writing new plays after *Street Theater*. In the 1990s, Wilson concentrated more on revising his five core plays rather than creating new material. His plays are frequently produced around the world, often as part of gay theater festivals or Pride celebrations. *Street Theater* is available both in the JH Gay Play Series and in an acting version from United Stages, which also publishes *Now She Dances!*.

In 1994, Wilson received the Robert Chesley Award for Lifetime Achievement in Gay Theater.

Wilson died on May 7, 2011 in New York City.

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Brandon Hayes is an undergraduate student concentrating in Humanities in the Honors Program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Founder of a theater group, he has produced and directed Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, among other plays.