

Content from our friends over at [John Garcia's The Column](#)



Wednesday, December 2, 2009 , Updated

Theater review: *Talley's Folly*

by [Christopher Soden](#) of [John Garcia's The Column](#)



Ken Birdsell

Shauna McLean and Chuck Huber in *Talley's Folly*

It's funny how different a play can sound when reduced to its plot. *Waiting for Godot*: Two friends kill time waiting for a guy who never shows up. *The Lion in Winter*: a dysfunctional royal British family snipes at each other during the Christmas holidays. [Talley's Folly](#) (now playing at [Theatre Three](#) in Dallas): overbearing Jewish accountant tries to convince Midwestern Gentile spinster to marry him. You see where I'm going with this. Dismal though a premise may seem, a gifted playwright, whether it's Samuel Beckett, William Golding or Lanford Wilson can step up and hit a home run.

There are many reasons to like *Talley's Folly*, second in Lanford Wilson's *Talley Cycle* that includes *Talley & Son* and *Fifth of July*. It doesn't fit neatly into the standard category of drama or comedy. It's got pathos and quirky humor and anger and introspection. It lasts 97 minutes but doesn't feel abrupt or otherwise like a one-act. It's filled with resonant metaphors culled intelligently from circumstance : the unfinished boathouse that might have been a gazebo, the suitor balancing ice skates on wooden planks, the painful personal history set up like an ethnic gag.

Before the lights have completely darkened, Matt Friedman addresses the audience directly, informing us, that he will be proposing to Sally Talley, and has only a short time to do so. Sally is the "black sheep" liberal in the Conservative Protestant Talley family, living in Lebanon, Missouri. Friedman in effect, makes us his conspirators, preparing us for rhapsody and romance, which, perversely, emerges in only odd ways and not exactly in quantity. When Sally shows up, thin, small (Shauna McLean) but certainly not frail, she's not exactly happy to see him. His appearance at her home (rather than the hospital where she nurses) has thrown the household into upheaval and Sally (understandably) does not appreciate this.



Ken Birdsell

Shauna McLean and Chuck Huber in *Talley's Folly*

Like many other excellent contemporary playwrights (Mamet, Shepard, Rabe) Wilson raises questions in our mind. Matt Friedman is persistent (as many smitten men can be) but he doesn't seem delusional. The idea of stalking in the sense we have today didn't exist in 1979, when *Folly* won the Pulitzer, or 1944 when the play is set. Sally doesn't Matt feel welcome, but she doesn't exactly chase him off. As the story develops, it's clear Friedman is holding her accountable for something, and eventually, Sally will do the same to him. It's clear Matt is making a nuisance of himself, and yet, as many wooers realize, there's some twinkling suggestion, some phantom of mutual yearning, that encourages him even when she says (in essence) "Take a hint and get lost."

Indeed phantoms of painful disappointments and failed idealism haunt *Talley's Folly*, informing the scrapping and cajoling and wheedling that make up so much of its content. The captivating, wistful, vaguely eerie boat house, with its broken planks and snowy,

evanescent moss, designed by Jeffrey Schmidt (who also directed) would almost seem to be a character itself : a monument to Sally's uncle who built unwanted structures all over town, yet died a happy man. There's something about Matt and Sally too that somehow feels unfinished. Ambivalent.

In a way you could say there's nothing new about *Talley's Folly*, but Lanford Wilson makes the familiar surprising and bracing. There's nothing much lovey-dovey going on, at least not between the two at the same time. Both Friedman and Talley have a looming, incapacitating secret that is keeping them, or the other, from taking that terrifying, dangerous step into opening one's heart to an apparently innocuous stranger. They're both savvy enough to understand that entering romance relatively late, there's an undisclosed brokenness lurking.

Wilson takes a risk too, I think, in that Friedman can be a bit much, as a man on a mission often can be. There are times, too, when it may be a little too trying to follow this progressively intimate exchange.

Wilson trusts us to be magnanimous and patient. And if we can only trust Wilson, through this clumsy dance of two wounded foragers, the experience can be breathtaking.



Pegasus News content partner - [John Garcia's The Column](#)