

LANFORD WILSON

**PULITZER-WINNING
PLAYWRIGHT**

b. April 13, 1937
d. March 24, 2011

**He was a Pulitzer
Prize-winning
playwright and
Off-Off-Broadway
pioneer.**

*“If you ... once dreamed of everlasting love,
don’t give up the dream, find it again.”*

Lanford Wilson was a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and a pioneer of the Off-Off-Broadway and regional theater movements. Known for his experimental style and nuanced exploration of relationships—including themes of gay identity—he was among the first playwrights to transition from Off-Off-Broadway to Broadway productions.

Wilson was born in Lebanon, Missouri. When his parents split five years later, he moved with his mother to Springfield. She remarried when he was 11, and the family settled in Ozark, where Wilson remained through high school.

In 1956, Wilson moved to San Diego, California, to live with his father and study art in college. A year later, he relocated to Chicago. He found work as a graphic designer and studied playwriting at the University of Chicago.

Wilson moved to New York City in 1962, where he met Joe Cino, owner of Caffe Cino, a coffee house turned theater in the West Village, credited as the birthplace of Off-Off Broadway. Wilson premiered his first play there in 1963. His 1964 play, “The Madness of Lady Bright,” marked a breakout success for Wilson and the venue.

In 1968, Wilson’s “The Gingham Dog” opened at a regional theater. In 1969, it debuted on Broadway. It was his first play to achieve that feat.

Around this time, Wilson met Michael Warren Powell, an actor with whom he developed a romantic relationship. In 1969, with director Marshall W. Mason and several others, Wilson and Powell cofounded the Circle Repertory Company in a Manhattan loft. With Mason’s direction, many of Wilson’s productions achieved considerable success.

“Talley’s Folly”—the second play in Wilson’s “Talley Trilogy,” based on a fictitious family from his birthplace—was first performed Off Broadway by Circle Rep in 1979 and moved to Broadway the following year. The one-act, two-person play earned Wilson the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1980. His last play of the trilogy, “Fifth of July,” starring Christopher Reeve and Jeff Daniels, premiered on Broadway later that year. It earned five Tony nominations, including Wilson’s first of three for Best Play.

Wilson earned numerous other accolades during his career, including five Obie awards and the PEN/Laura PELS International Foundation for Theater Award as a master American dramatist. He was also elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Wilson moved to his vacation home in Sag Harbor in 1998, where he lived full-time until his death from pneumonia at 73.



lgbt[™]
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright © 2025 – A Project of Equality Forum