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The Sand Castle- An Extended Family of Inspiration

You never know who is going to walk in and change your life. Sometimes there is a one-time interaction in a coffee shop. Sometimes a new family is born. American playwright, Lanford Wilson, found a family that helped inspire, enrich, catapult and advise his career. *The Sand Castle*, which Lanford Wilson wrote in 1965, delves into the psychological world of the creative Renolds family in San Diego. The rich development of characters in *The Sand Castle*, specifically the character Sasha, can be traced to Wilson's personal connection with his San Diego State classmates and the Brown family who inspired the Renolds family, during his time in California. The Lanford Wilson Collection of archival sources in the University of Missouri Libraries' Special Collections and Rare Books sector contain materials which help reveal the close relationship between Wilson, Sasha, whose real name was Tanya Newton (better known as Tanya Rose) and the rest of the Brown family. The archives contain many manuscripts of *The Sand Castle* but also very personal letters, which provide insight into Wilson's relationships and how these relationships influenced and enhanced his overall experience and writing career.

While Wilson clearly states in his introduction that the characters and plot of *The Sand Castle* are not fully based on members of the Brown family, he does say, "The story is absurd, a foolish plot to display a wonderful extended family."¹ This statement indicates Wilson found overall inspiration from the Brown family and friends. It can also be

¹ (Wilson 1996)

speculated, that writing about the Brown family was a big step toward Wilson's most autobiographical play, *Lemon Sky*.

In his introduction to *The Sand Castle*, Wilson references the characters Sasha, Owen, and Jill who he said were in his first writing class at San Diego State.² Wilson writes fondly of these people and their continued constructive criticism of his work. . Wilson also references LoVerne Brown in his introduction. LoVerne inspired the character Irene in *The Sand Castle*. Irene, like LoVerne, is a motherly figure to all and the matriarch of her family. Wilson references a time when he sent his first finished play to Loverne for criticism and "LoVerne said it didn't matter if it was any good, she was proud of me for finishing it."³ Wilson then continues to say that he loved LoVerne. Further evidence of his close, nearly familial, relationship with the Brown family. Wilson's friendship with the Brown family became very important after Wilson experienced difficulties with his own family. Wilson wrote that he spent "every hour [he] could" in the Brown household after he moved out of his father's home.⁴

Wilson was born in Lebanon, Missouri in 1937. His parents divorced in 1942 and his father moved to California. In 1956, Wilson moved to California to live with his father, his stepmother, his two half brothers and two girls his father and stepmother housed.⁵ Wilson lasted about six months in his father's house before he was kicked out.⁶ The events of Wilson's experience with his family, in San Diego, are depicted in his 1970 play, *Lemon Sky*,

² (Wilson 1996)

³ (Wilson 1996)

⁴ (Wilson 1996)

⁵ (Doc n.d.)

⁶ (Wilson 1996)

which Wilson describes as his “most nakedly autobiographical play.”⁷ During his time in California, Wilson hoped to reconnect with his father but instead began writing and connected with people who helped advance his career through initial reviews of his writing, inspiration, love and support. A handful of incoming and outgoing correspondences in the Lanford Wilson Collection provide primary source evidence and insights into some of the most important relationships of Wilson’s career.

The Sand Castle is a family drama in the form of a short memory play. At times, the play takes the tone of Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* or Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. However, *The Sand Castle*’s absurdist nature, sporadic musical numbers and shocking plot twists make the play incredibly unique. *The Sand Castle* centers around eight core characters: Irene, Owen, Joan, Kenny, Sasha, Clint and Calvin. Jill is an eighth character in the play that is talked about but never seen on stage.⁸

Irene, Owen, Joan and Kenny make up a Southern California family. The family moved to Ocean Beach after originally residing in Fresno, California.⁹ Irene is the mother, an educator and poet. She can be categorized as a very wise, strong and maternal character. Irene dates Clint, a bus driver who is arguably of a different social class than Irene and her family. Both Sasha and Joan “makes moves” on Clint. Most of these moves are seen as jokes and continue on as friendly banter. This is until Joan, Irene’s daughter, seduces Clint outside her mother’s bedroom window.¹⁰

Owen is Irene’s older son has an almost obsessive crush on Jill, Calvin’s wife. Calvin is a friend of Irene’s family and a student with Joan and Sasha. Like Sasha, Calvin spends an

⁷ (Wilson, *Lemon Sky* Introduction 1996)

⁸ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle* 1996)

⁹ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle* 1996)

¹⁰ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle* 1996)

immense amount of time at the Renolds household, spending time with his friends and having Irene help him with his writing, even though his pregnant wife is home alone.

Sasha is another friend of the family who spends most of her time at the Renolds home. Sasha is a dynamic character with a big personality. At times, Sasha becomes incredibly sexual when making jokes with Clint and Calvin. However, when Calvin begins to seriously reciprocate her advances, Sasha backs off and asks him to stop. Lastly, Kenny is Irene's youngest son. He is twelve and the narrator of the play. It often seems that Kenny is cast aside or ignored by the other characters that are very wrapped up in their own worlds, scandals and desires.

In the introduction to *The Sandcastle*, Wilson does not correlate every member of his San Diego extended family to specific characters in the play. He makes a clear correlation between Sasha and Tanya Newton. Then it can be inferred that, LoVerne Brown inspired Irene, the maternal poet. Joan was most likely based on "Jonnie," LoVerne's daughter.¹¹ Jonnie still resides in Ocean Beach and is active with the Ocean Beach Historical Society.¹² A LoVerne Wilson Brown Facebook page, which seems to be run by LoVerne's granddaughter, posted a link to the first volume of *Lanford Willson Collected Works* on May 31, 2009 with the following caption: "No relation to our family, but Lanford Wilson lived at their house for a bit while Tony and Jonnie were at San Diego State. This collection mentions LoVerne. The play *The Sandcastle* is loosely based on his time with them."¹³ This post identifies Tony as Owen for reasons of age. According to an interview with Marshall Mason, a director who worked closely with Wilson in New York and *directed The Sand*

¹¹ (MacQueen 2014)

¹² (Society n.d.)

¹³ ("Lanford Wilson." Facebook.)

Castle multiple times, Tony Brown became a poet.¹⁴ One of his poems can be found on YouTube.¹⁵

Wilson met Tanya, Tony and the character of Jill, whose real name is unknown, in a Directed Writing class at San Diego State University.¹⁶ Wilson noted how the collaborative nature of his San Diego State writing club mimicked the atmosphere of collaboration at Circle Rep, an experimental theatre off-off Broadway, in the sense that playwrights sat around (typically with wine), read each other's work aloud and provided each other with feedback.¹⁷

Although Wilson repeatedly mentions group reviewing both at San Diego State and circle rep, he refers to Tanya as his "only sounding-board" early in his career.¹⁸ For this reason, Wilson promised Tanya that "if [he] ever had anything published" he would dedicate it to her. Wilson's early play, *Balm in Gilead*, includes a dedication to Tanya. Wilson said he believed that he would always keep in touch with his San Diego extended family.¹⁹ The Lanford Wilson archival sources at the University of Missouri help illustrate the almost familial relationships Wilson had with the Tanya and the Brown family and shed a light on the love and support of Wilson's San Diego writing community.

The Wilson archives contain a number of correspondences between Wilson and Tanya. The correspondences confirm Tanya was a sounding board for Wilson in many aspects of his writing. There are two "Tanya-specific" correspondences in the collection.

¹⁴ (Mason 2015)

¹⁵ (Mason 2015)

¹⁶ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle Introduction* 1996)

¹⁷ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle Introduction* 1996)

¹⁸ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle Introduction* 1996)

¹⁹ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle Introduction* 1996)

The first Correspondence is a one page typed letter from Wilson to Tanya. The letter is densely typed on brown brittle paper, lacks a signature and date. The letter opens with the phrase, "I will probably never mail this..." This opening sentence foreshadows that the rest of the letter will contain moderately personal material. As the letter continues, Wilson states that he wants to write a new play, but is having trouble writing creatively. In other words, Wilson is writing to Tanya as a way to inspire himself and figure out how he feels about his various ideas. Wilson turning to Tanya for discussion and inspiration returns to the root of their friendship and the times they shared with their writing classmates at San Diego State University. It can be inferred that collaborative discussions helped shape Wilson's writing, he mentions the collaborative process in his play introductions and his correspondences with Tanya. As previously mentioned, collaborative discussions became an integral part of the Circle Rep model.

Wilson's letter contains traces of inspiration for *Lemon Sky* and *The Sand Castle*. Wilson lays out the character structure that he ended up using in *Lemon Sky* but keeps mentioning a beach house location, like the beach house described in *The Sand Castle*. Wilson says he doesn't want to write a family drama and references a story he told Tanya before that "strikes too familiar notes on all sides."²⁰ This note shows that before writing *Lemon Sky*, and presumably *The Sand Castle*, Wilson gave quite a bit of thought to the topics he would cover and the way he would frame the people he wrote about.

At the end of the letter, Wilson discusses possible conflicts and character disputes and then states that he doesn't know how the story should end;

²⁰ (Wilson, Lanford. Letter to Tanya Newton. N.D.)

“I don’t like the end; I don’t know the end yet, really; I don’t know what should really come of all this junk and fig trees. nacedness, naceadness... Nacadenss is only human....”²¹

The statement at the end of the letter, shows that Wilson still is not sure as to how he wants to tell his story. The length to which he discusses his own experiences in the letter (even though he doesn’t claim them as his own experiences) suggests he is itching to share his tale, but it seems to make him feel incredibly vulnerable, hence the comment about “nakedness,” (the misspelling of “nakedness” also confirms Wilson’s honesty when he proclaims himself to be a terrible typist in other correspondences). Wilson’s entire letter is very raw and sheds light on the essential role Tanya played in Wilson’s creative process.

The second “Tanya specific” correspondence is significantly shorter and quite a bit lighter than the first letter. It is a short typed note from Wilson to Tanya that seems to sum up the relationship between the two friends. It reads;

“Tanya sweets, Odetta baby,

Since you are seeing almost every damn thing I do- bad or good or horrible I thought I’d send this along too.

Don’t do too much poetry as you know- and you can probably tell why.

Comments always welcome.

Love and kisses (hands & feet & pubic area, nothing intimate or personal)”²²

Wilson’s note is friendly, warm and funny. The note also confirms the friends has a long-standing relationship of reviewing. The letter is sprinkled with what seem to be inside jokes, including a presumed reference to the 1960’s folk singer, Odetta. An intimate and

²¹ (Wilson, Lanford. Letter to Tanya Newton. N.D.)

²² (Wilson, Note to Tanya Newton n.d.)

humorous depiction of Tanya and Wilson's friendship is best portrayed in the notation Tanya made on Wilson's note when she sent it back to him. There is an arrow and the words, "You are fresh!" followed by a note that reads;

"I didn't really notice this until I finished my letter to you. Didn't you leave out an "L"? I just roared and turned red all over when I caught This Typo."²³

The banter between Wilson and Tanya not only enhances a vision of their friendship, but it also shows a bit of the inspiration for the character of Sasha in *The Sand Castle*. Sasha's character makes jokes that are very sexual but when others make jokes or act sexual toward her, her more prudent and embarrassed nature is revealed.

During an analysis of *The Sand Castle*, the primary overarching theme found reads as follows;

"There is a message about humanity in this play, a message about love. The characters crave human connection but they don't necessarily know how to get it. They use humor and they kid around. They have fun. They lie and then they hurt. They are all looking for something but don't know how to get what they want."

This insight becomes especially prominent in the character analysis of Sasha, particularly in her role as a family friend, and when looking at the absurdist structure of *The Sand Castle*.

At the beginning of the play, Sasha seems to lack consistent character traits, as she unexpectedly begins to sing in a seductive manner. She is a friend to the Renolds family and incredibly comfortable in their home. LoVerne treats Sasha like a daughter. However, there

²³ (Wilson, Note to Tanya Newton n.d.)

is a message in the play about how “Sometimes the best of friends must part.”²⁴ This message is important because at the end of the play, the Renolds’ friends leave and even amongst the turmoil of the night, the entire Renolds family still sleeps under one roof. This insight drives home the idea of an extended family. The Renolds were an extended family for Sasha, like the Browns were an extended family for Tanya and Wilson. Even though there isn’t a blood tie and at the end of the day everyone parts ways, the door is always open for love and the crazy, absurdist ups, downs and musical numbers of life. Whether they are absurdist, inconsistent, joking around or struggling to find inspiration, extended families understand each other and seek to support one another.

If research of *The Sand Castle* and the Brown family is to be continued, the next step is to contact LoVerne’s children, Tony and Joan to get their perspectives on Wilson and their family’s portrayal in *The Sand Castle*. Tony and Joan might be able to provide more information regarding the characters of Calvin, Jill and Kenny. Tony and Joan may also have more correspondence from or to Wilson with further insights into their relationships and the progression of Wilson’s career.

Speaking with members of the Brown family should also provide further insight to analyze other correspondences from the Wilson archives. In addition to the Tanya-specific letters, there are two letters of great interest contained in the archives. One of the letters is a sweet note from LoVerne Brown that was written in February of 1993. The letter talks about how LoVerne read and enjoyed Wilson’s play, *Redwood Curtain*. The letter is incredibly sweet and encouraging. At the time the letter was written, LoVerne hadn’t seen Wilson since he was 18, which would have been approximately 38 years prior. The letter

²⁴ (Wilson, *The Sand Castle* 1996)

closes with LoVerne writing “See you soon,” and offering to round anybody up. She even says that they are trying to find Tanya.

The second correspondence that is tied to the Brown family is a letter from Tony Brown to Wilson. In the letter Tony tells Wilson that Tanya shared two of Wilson’s pieces of writing with him. He then goes on to provide feedback regarding each of the pieces. Talking to Tony is a very important step to uncovering more information about Wilson’s relationships and his writing process.

Looking at the feedback Wilson received from his writing comrades could evolve into a huge study in terms of what and who truly shaped Wilson’s writing voice and pattern. Other people studying the Wilson archives have discussed how very little is known about Wilson’s writing process. More information about Wilson’s writing comrades, who influenced his craft so early on, will be key to uncovering how Wilson worked and why he seems to go from scattered notes to fully formed characters. The existing archives and Wilson’s transparency in his introduction to *The Sand Castle*, reveal Tanya as someone Wilson worked closely with on just about everything he wrote. This knowledge poses questions about the timeline of Wilson’s writing process- during what point in his writing process did he send his work to Tanya? Did she only read pieces when they were completely done? Did she help with brainstorming? Was there a mix?

After taking an initial dive into Wilson’s relationship with the Brown family and his San Diego friends, there are a lot of links between Wilson’s work on *The Sand Castle* and the development of his play *Lemon Sky*. Writing *The Sand Castle* and focusing on writing about real people, even in an adaptive form, was arguably a first step toward Wilson writing about his own life in *Lemon Sky*. Wilson’s friends could have given him the courage to write

his own story. The previously discussed letter to Tanya suggests that Wilson writing an autobiographical piece was discussed amongst his closest friends and collaborators. There are other parallels that can be seen in the writing of *The Sand Castle* and *Lemon Sky*. One of the strongest and most interesting parallels is the use of a younger male narrator. Kenny and Alan are a number of years apart, but they both take interesting and insightful perspectives on what is happening around them. Additionally, they are both separated from the other characters in the sense that Kenny is younger and Alan is new to the area, uncomfortable with his family and an overall outsider.

Many aspects of *The Sand Castle* are still a mystery, but what sets *The Sand Castle* apart from Wilson's other plays is the fact that there is more of an opportunity to obtain a detailed information about Wilson's beautifully developed characters through utilizing the resource that is real people and the documentation of their lives. Sasha, Tony, LoVerne and the more unknown characters of *The Sand Castle*, are an important piece to the playwright that is Lanford Wilson. They were his inspiration, his supporters, his reviewers, and some of his closest friends. Sasha and the Brown family knew Lanford Wilson well and helped shape his life and his legacy.

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