

Moving `Fifth of July' chronicles wounded veteran's momentous weekend

By John Farrell

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Lanford Wilson's "Fifth of July" was probably shocking when it opened in New York City in 1978.

The Vietnam War was still a festering open wound then, and the idea of an openly affectionate male homosexual couple on stage wasn't commonplace.

The new production of "Fifth of July" that opened Saturday at the Studio Theater of the Long Beach Playhouse was not in the least shocking, not even the male-on-male kiss at play's end. That part is ancient history.

But the story Wilson tells of a young veteran, a paraplegic who is trying to pull his life together, is unfortunately still a headline issue.

Wilson's humor, his gentle way with character development, his deep understanding of a group of family and friends gathered in central Missouri for a

weekend, is as lovely and moving as ever - and maybe better because it no longer shocks.

Kenneth Talley Jr. (Sean Gray) is the wounded veteran around whom the action revolves. He lives with his lover (Jed Jenkins) in the family home, a run-down farmhouse in a small town. Also living there are his sister June Talley (Jenn Robbins), her 13-year-old daughter Shirley Talley (Tara Lynn Barr) and their Aunt Sally Friedman (Harriet Whitmyer).

Kenneth is committed to beginning a career as a high school teacher but is having doubts, and the arrival of John Landis (Cort Huckabone) and Gwen Landis (Katherine Prenovost), his longtime friends, and Weston Hurley (David Anton) just makes things more difficult.

John and Gwen wanted Kenneth to go to Europe with them to dodge the draft, but instead he stayed home, went to Vietnam and returned a paraplegic with horrible nightmares.

Gwen is very rich and wants to pursue a singing career with the drug-spacey Weston as her songwriter. She decides she wants to buy the Talley home and build her studio there. Kenneth has to decide, in the space of a weekend, about his love life, his future, his career and his family.

Wilson builds his play with simple clarity. You learn about the characters as the story develops and you watch them reveal themselves: their loves, their lives, their ambitions.

You learn Kenneth is a paraplegic only when he has to grab his hidden crutches to walk. Weston doesn't talk much, and never too clearly, but you learn to admire his common sense and talent. Shirley may only be 13, but she wants to be 17, 19, 21 and you see why.

Aunt Sally seems distracted at first, but she, too, develops into a strong-willed and clear-eyed woman who knows what she wants from life.

The play requires a matter-of-fact cast. This is the real world, and you need to believe these are real people.

Gray's Kenneth only once descends into self-pity. His lover is calm in the middle of the storm of emotion, and his sister only reveals her secret under deep emotional pressure.

Barr is a precocious young actress and has great fun as Shirley. Prenovost is bright and precocious as Gwen, but there is steel in her, too. Huckabone must be the villain in the piece, but his villainy seems to be, finally, friendship in disguise.

The Studio Theater is a small space, but stage and lighting designer Daniel Wheeler has created a wonderfully evocative set for the Talley home, with peeling wallpaper and cheap, comfortable furniture. And Donna Fritsche's costumes are just right.

There is subtlety in Phyllis B. Gitlin's direction, which has an eye for real incidents and gentle humor.

You won't be shocked by Wilson's view of our recent past, but you will learn how complicated life can be for those who sacrifice for their country, and for their friends and lovers.

review

Fifth of July

What: Play by Lanford Wilson, presented by Long Beach Playhouse, directed by Phyllis B. Gitlin Where: Studio Theater, Long Beach Playhouse, 5021 E. Anaheim St., Long Beach

Tickets: \$22, \$20 for seniors, \$12 for students with I.D.

Our rating: Four stars

Information: 562-494-1014, <http://www.lbph.com>.

When: Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 8 p.m.,

Sunday at 2 p.m., 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., 2 p.m. Sundays at 2 p.m. through May 23.

John Farrell is a Long Beach freelance writer. More of his articles can be read at <http://byjohnfarrell.typepad.com>.