

The New York Times Theater

A Theater Is Conjured, Then Leaves Only Memory

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After 10 months organizing an underground production of [Lanford Wilson](#)'s 1965 drama, "Balm in Gilead," Beau Willimon reached a dream-come-true moment on Thursday afternoon: His cast of 25 actors, drawn from across the country and given just days to work, was rehearsing for the first time in its 15,000-square-foot playing area in a South Brooklyn warehouse where the show was to have its one-night-only run.



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Zoe Perry, center, and cast in "Balm in Gilead" in Brooklyn. The play was staged on Sunday after a few days' rehearsing.

Then reality bit. Sweaty, plaster-covered workers were building bathrooms for the troupe, and their dolly tracked a trail of grime through the artist's studio next door. So Mr. Willimon, one of the play's four directors and de facto producers, grabbed a couple of people, some water and soap and brushes, and got to scrubbing.

"That wasn't built into the day's schedule, but neither were a hundred other surprises," he said afterward. "My hands worked and my mind thought about Act II. Doing this play is about having

a special experience, but we also wanted to be respectful to our neighbors, to every person who helped us do this crazy thing.”

For four days and nights the cast and crew veered between controlled chaos and muted anxiety attacks. Fourteen metal-frame beds were set up for actors who wanted full immersion. The stain-covered mattresses, in turn, became audience seating at Sunday’s there-and-it’s-gone “Gilead” for 500 friends and others.



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

It was the sort of theatrical hot mess, done with the blessing of Wilson’s estate (he died in March), that rarely happens on such an ambitious scale in New York nowadays. The cast was a mix of somewhat knowns (Michael Shannon, Mia Barron) and unknowns. The production felt homemade, with a motorcycle borrowed at the last minute for atmospherics to help create a street scene. And Sunday’s audience was overflowing with indie cred, like a social register for a fantasy DoBro (Downtown Brooklyn) theater. The playwrights David Greenspan, Amy Herzog and Rajiv Joseph were there. The directors Sam Gold and Alex Timbers were there. The actors Adam Driver, Seth Numrich and Michael Stahl-David were there. (Judith Light and Dan Lauria, the stars of the recent Broadway drama “Lombardi,” were there too.)

“Seems like every person I’ve met in New York theater is in this space tonight,” said the playwright Annie Baker (“Circle Mirror Transformation”), whose light sundress proved a smart choice for the windowless warehouse that, moments later, would be steaming with body heat.

At the center of the orderly disorder was Mr. Willimon, a rising star of a playwright best known for [“Farragut North,”](#) which George Clooney is making into a movie. Mr. Willimon came across “Balm in Gilead” as a teenager in St. Louis in the early 1990s, when he decided to read up on writers and poets from Missouri. Wilson was from the town of Lebanon, and the countryside was the setting of his [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning “Talley’s Folly,” among other plays.

“Gilead” was one of Wilson’s earliest works, inspired by his eavesdropping at New York coffee shops where he went to write, and it helped establish Off Off Broadway as a scene with its debut at La MaMa. The play is less a story than a collection of characters — prostitutes, drug dealers,

heroin addicts — yammering and fighting and loving and living in the hours before dawn at one greasy spoon on Upper Broadway.

“I’d never seen a production of ‘Balm in Gilead,’ ” Mr. Willimon said, “and it was one of these plays where I loved the language but was confounded how it would work and sound with all its overlapping dialogue.”

Last August he attended the annual Chekhov production on [Lake Lucille](#), about an hour from Manhattan, that the directors Brian Mertes and Melissa Kievman have been mounting outdoors, from scratch and in just a week’s time, for several years. Mr. Willimon asked the two if he could borrow their aesthetic for a “Gilead” and invited them to join the work. He then began working with Chashama, an organization that provides low-cost space for New York artists, which eventually led him to the 33rd Street warehouse in Greenwood. He and his fellow directors, meanwhile, began reaching out to friends to build a theater company — which they called Balm in Gilead, Brooklyn — that ultimately became 70 strong.

Unlike typical rehearsals of four weeks or so, the compressed schedule of “Gilead” forced the actors to rely on their own first instincts to make choices about their characters rather than mull them for days with their directors. Patch Darragh, as Dopey, a junkie and the unofficial narrator of the play, invented a personal back story to help him locate both sadness and a certain hopefulness.

“I imagined Dopey came from a family with some means, from a world unlike that in the coffee shop, which helps him narrate directly to the audience because he knows the coffee shop is otherworldly,” said Mr. Darragh, most recently seen Off Broadway to acclaim in the new play “Kin” and the revival of “The Glass Menagerie.”

Probably the biggest name in the cast was Mr. Shannon, an Academy Award nominee for “Revolutionary Road” and a co-star of HBO’s “Boardwalk Empire.” A physically imposing actor with an executioner’s glower, Mr. Shannon seemed ready-made for the lethal role of the Stranger, who appears briefly in two scenes but drives the play to its climax.



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

The actor Michael Shannon, center, and a director, Brian Mertes, right, during a rehearsal last Thursday.

“This play hardly ever gets produced because of the huge cast,” Mr. Shannon said, “and Kate and I felt it was worth being seen.” He was referring to his partner, Kate Arrington, who played the strung-out addict, Babe.

While the play had a well-received Off Off Broadway run this winter, the last major “Gilead” in New York was the [celebrated Circle Repertory Theater production](#) in 1984, directed by John Malkovich, which included Laurie Metcalf, who received career-making raves as Darlene, and Jeff Perry, who played Franny. The two actors had a child, Zoe Perry, who has become an actress herself, and was recruited to reprise her mother’s old role.

The part is best known for the 20-minute monologue in which Darlene, now a prostitute, recalls heartbreakingly happier days in Chicago. Given her own schedule and the tight rehearsals, Ms. Perry said she learned the monologue in a week, through a memorization trick that involved writing the first letter of every word in the speech onto a legal pad. During a break on Friday evening Ms. Perry flipped through her seven pages of letters — separated by periods and commas — and expressed relief that it had worked for her.

Ms. Metcalf missed the show on Sunday evening — she was home with Ms. Perry’s younger siblings — but the young actress made it a memory in her own right for the audience. By the end of the show, which went off without a hitch, they were on their feet applauding in a snap.

Hours later the set was struck, the warehouse cleaned, and all that was left were those two new bathrooms.

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