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Marsha Norman's Bi-Regional Vision in *'night, Mother*

PLAYWRIGHT MARSHA NORMAN WAS BORN AND RAISED IN LOUISVILLE, Kentucky, a pleasant city along the Ohio River on the northern fringe of a Southern border state that did not join the Confederacy. Like other cities along this region-defining river, Louisville operates at an intersection of Southern and Midwestern cultural perspectives. Whereas its sister river city, Cincinnati, seems more Midwestern, in Louisville Southern elements hold greater sway. But not surprisingly in this borderland area, cultures meet, amalgamate, and sometimes clash. Marsha Norman's most famous dramatic work embodies this bi-cultural dynamic, less as literary ideology than as aesthetic and social *Weltanschauung*.

Other successful playwrights have dramatized regional differences in striking ways. William Inge's *Kansas* is situated on the Great Plains western fringe of the Midwest. *Bus Stop* (1955) and particularly *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (1957) incorporate Western themes and characters into Inge's largely Midwestern vision. Arthur Miller's two major Midwestern plays, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) and *All My Sons* (1947), written following his student days at the University of Michigan, retain some features of the playwright's Northeastern Jewish perspective in a new regional setting. Tennessee Williams set a number of works in the city of his youth, St. Louis, which he always called some variant of "a large Midwestern American city" (*The Long Goodbye* 203). Although Midwestern elements surfaced in his later plays, Williams always regarded his dramatized South as a region quite distinct.

The Glass Menagerie (1944) enacts the regionally marked dilemma of the narrator Tom, who cannot accept either the faded, over-heated, not-altogether-truthful Southern heritage of Amanda or the gung-ho, work-oriented, self-improving Midwesternism of Jim. In Williams's farewell to St. Louis, two regional options tear at the pivotal character so much he feels forced to flee. In real life, the playwright departed St. Louis first for New Orleans and thereafter to New York before traveling to many locations in his subsequently restless life. Only in the late *A*

Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur (1978) can the central character opt to find comfort and remain in the previously rejected Midwest.

From the outset of her career, Marsha Norman has established herself as an explorer in diverse regions, even as she has remained emotionally anchored in her native Kentucky. *Getting Out* (1979), her first major dramatic success, takes place simultaneously in a Kentucky apartment and at a co-ed prison in Alabama. The audience receives a gritty yet gripping portrait of life both inside and outside confinement, based on the playwright's experience while working in a state mental hospital (*Collected* 2). *The Holdup* (1982), set in New Mexico, derives from stories her grandfather told of his youth in the American Southwest (*Collected* 164). *Sarah and Abraham* (1992) explores bi-cultural territory by interposing Biblical characters and themes into the present. *Loving Daniel Boone* (1992) again features a dialogue between contemporary life and Kentucky in 1778.

The bi-regional perspective in *'night, Mother* (1981) differs profoundly, imbedded in what Robert Brustein calls "a minutely detailed mosaic of the commonplaces of everyday modern life" (160). This work investigates a philosophical intersection of Midwest and South, though the regional poles are never identified as such or specifically grounded in either history or tradition. Unlike Tom at the end of *The Glass Menagerie*, the two central characters cannot simply leave town; the clash remains more fundamental and intractable. *'night, Mother* enacts a more existential impasse that never gets resolved. In order to understand the fascinating bi-regionality of this award-winning play, we must position its characters, themes, and world-views in the context of two distinct American sub-cultures.

I use the term "bi-regional" in the title of this essay advisedly. Scholars of hybridity such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak have concentrated their attention on colonial and post-colonial contexts in the nexus of identity, hegemony, misappropriation, and resistance. Robert J. C. Young defines cultural hybridity as inherently unstable, a union in which each of the parts threatens to revert "to its original state" (26). But the blended consciousness of northern Kentucky and Southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio represents a more stable fusion of elements from neighboring regions, common enough in various borderland areas of the US and much less marked by historical tensions that have been largely superseded. The cultural hybrid of this particular segment of

American geography has become so established that we can identify the composite elements only by referring to markers common to their larger component regions.

Southern and Midwestern cultures, as enacted on stage, differ markedly in style, emphasis, and perspective, as well as in the way drama from these two regions portrays character, the home, the environment, social structure, time, and history.¹ The typical Southern home, for instance, almost always carries the markers of ancestral history. Allen Tate has identified "that backward glance [that] gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (Rubin 262). Moreover, this history incarnates class hierarchy and the legacy of slavery. Events occurring now are contextualized historically whether the characters like it or not in such plays as Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) or Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1979). The Civil War still very strongly informs Southern consciousness. Conventional stage decor signifies the ongoing legacy of the past through inherited family furniture, portraits, and knick-knacks. Stories told and re-told through generations inhabit the Southern home and connect through their common ghosts.

The Midwestern home, by contrast, is ahistorical, anchored in an environment of the present and strikingly egalitarian and middle class. Such plays as William Vaughn Moody's *The Faith Healer* (1909), William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), and Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) conspicuously lack racial markers. The Midwestern home on stage seems grounded in its neighborhood by means of daily chores that take on an emblematic cyclicity of time. Like the seasons, the daily rhythms of preparing meals, cleaning up, dressing, going to work, and bringing home supplies take on larger meanings that structure life in comforting circles. This stands in clear contrast to the more linear historicity that characterizes the traditional Southern home. Rather than trading stories, Midwestern characters tend to share work rituals, a pattern evident in virtually all of August Wilson's plays.

Midwestern and Southern character types also differ markedly. Compared to the sometimes garrulous story-telling South, the Midwest is decidedly laconic and commonsensical. Flamboyant characters like Big Daddy or Babe, in Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, rarely appear in

¹For a fuller discussion of signature themes, characters, and tropes of Midwestern drama, see Radavich.

Midwestern plays. Eccentricity and gothic excess, sometimes bleeding into caricature, form an inescapable part of Southern literary culture, whereas Midwestern society tolerates much less oddness or non-conformity. A wide range of Midwestern works such as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Sam Shepard's *Bury the Dead* (1978) enact the tension between individual expression and social refusal to accept idiosyncrasy or unpleasant truth. If Southern characters frequently garnish their narratives with zest and color, their Midwestern counterparts more often struggle with words and find escape in silence or the simple dignity of daily rituals.

Among Norman's early plays, *Third and Oak: The Laundromat* (1978) features the most overt Midwestern references. In fact, the setting is not fixed geographically at all: a "standard, dreary laundromat" at 3 a.m. (*Collected* 61). As in other plays from the heartland, discussion emerges from the rhythms of everyday chores, in this case sorting, washing, drying, and folding clothes. As Pamela Monaco points out, perspectives in *The Laundromat* radiate between the reserved Alberta and the loquacious Deedee in a pattern similar to that in *'night, Mother* (213). Alberta is a retired school teacher from Columbus, Ohio, whereas Deedee's comically grotesque stories connect her firmly to Southern traditions. A handsome black man named Shooter, whose mother comes from Indiana, furthers the cross-regional dynamic.

The Laundromat ends with elements strongly prefiguring the resolution of *'night, Mother*. When Deedee, the "restless twenty-year-old" (*Collected* 60), asks Alberta, a mother figure (even if unrelated) in her fifties, how she stands the loneliness, Alberta answers bluntly, "I can't. (Pauses.) But I have to, just the same" (*Collected* 84). In a final thematic cross-over, Deedee, the character who throughout earlier dialogue didn't know how to shut up (*Collected* 81), rejects Alberta's suggestion to wake up the attendant to talk with and now feels "ready for a little peace and quiet" (*Collected* 84). Having been goaded into telling Alberta the truth about her hollow marriage, Deedee can find momentary solace in merely staring out the window.

Whereas *The Laundromat* counterposes Southern and Midwestern elements without significant discomfort, *'night, Mother* showcases a stark conflict between world views, both "epistemological and ontological," grounded in disparate geographic traditions (Demastes 114). Mama and her daughter Jessie embody radically different social

perspectives strongly tinged with regional signifiers. The signification never surfaces overtly as in the plays of Tennessee Williams, where the Midwest and South carry intentional effects and sometimes play directly against one another. Rather, Norman imbeds regional markers into the central conflict apparently without desiring to call attention to cultural, as opposed to personal, differences. This seemingly unconscious juxtaposition may result in large measure from Louisville's own double-sided perspective as a geographical melding of Midwest and South (more on that later).

Before any action begins, the text counterposes the only two figures appearing in the play. Like many Midwestern characters—from those of William Dean Howells through Susan Glaspell and William Inge to David Mamet and beyond—Jessie is someone who “doesn't feel much like talking” (2). She comes to language slowly and imperfectly. In trying to justify her intention to commit suicide, she confesses, “I can't say it any better” (28) as if to underscore the inadequacy of language, a common feature of Midwestern literature and culture. Her father likewise was a misunderstood man of silences. The “Big old faded blue man in the chair” liked to spend time thinking about “His corn. His boots” (47).

Mama, by contrast, seems Southern in noticeably conventional terms. She “speaks quickly and enjoys talking”; “She is chatty and nosy, and this is *her* house” (2). Unlike Jessie's sometimes blunt plain speaking, Mama's words sugar-coat reality—made concrete through her extreme love of all manner of sweets. In the great Southern tradition of story-telling, she enjoys creating narrative that at least in some instances bears marginal relation to the truth. According to her most elaborate tale, “Agnes Fletcher's burned down every house she ever lived in. Eight fires, and she's due for a new one any day now” (38). Mama goes on to claim that Agnes lives in a “house full of birds” and that Agnes's constant eating of okra “two meals a day” has “Made her crazy” (40).

Jessie's probing after truth forces Mama to admit that Agnes has only two birds and doesn't really eat okra all the time: “Maybe not two meals, but . . .” (ellipsis in the original; 40). After yet further probing, Jessie gets Mama to admit she doesn't really know how much okra Agnes eats. This central tension between blunt truth-telling and elaborate falsification runs throughout the play, forming its ideological core. Whereas Mama argues that “Things don't have to be true to talk about 'em,” Jessie

accuses her mother of lying (41). From the outset, Jessie's quest concentrates on exposing falsehood and living forthrightly. The unfolding events gradually strip away layers of distortion and obfuscation that have plagued this family for years. Much of the bracing energy of this play derives from its unstinting pursuit of honesty, a trait commonly validated in Midwestern plays and stories.

Mirroring the central thematic through-line, the setting embodies both regional intonations. The house is "relatively new" and located "out on a country road" (3). Unlike many Southern homes—at least as depicted on stage—no ancestral presence or history lurks, and no physical connection to a neighborhood or community surfaces. Very few visitors come to visit; we are told that Jessie always leaves when they arrive, and Agnes no longer stops by at all, since she witnessed one of Jessie's epileptic seizures and too strongly recalled her own mortality. In terms of architecture and decor, the house seems plain and unadorned, as "unaccented" as the playwright instructs the dialogue to be (3). Two clocks in the kitchen and living room demarcate time in strictly unsentimental terms.

At the same time, many contents of the house radiate Southernness. Stage directions describe the living room as "cluttered with magazines and needlework catalogues, ashtrays and candy dishes" (3). Examples of Mama's needlework punctuate the scene—"pillows, afghans, and quilts, doilies and rugs, and they are quite nice examples" (3). Even so, the interior "is not quaint" (3). The first action we witness on stage strongly underscores its Southernness: Mama searching for and finding a "coconut-covered, raspberry-and-marshmallow-filled" cupcake called a snowball (5). Mama unwraps the cupcake, complaining to herself, "I hate it when the coconut falls off. Why does the coconut fall off?" (5).

This first glimpse of Mama reinforces her character as a lover of sweets and sugar coatings. In many places later in the text, she would prefer not to know and not to hear. The initial cupcake-seeking behavior also establishes her link to the Southern gothic tradition, later echoed in a variety of charmingly grotesque statements and actions. At one point, Mama speculates that Jessie's sister-in-law, Loretta, might be a better person "if she didn't wear that yellow all the time" (22). Later on, Mama suggests that instead of committing suicide, Jessie should do "Something like . . . buying us all new dishes! I'd like that" (ellipsis in the original; 34).

In contrast to Mama's eccentric lucubrations, Jessie confines herself to purposeful tasks and preparations for her impending departure. In a manner consistent with so many Midwestern plays, she concentrates on daily chores of seeming insignificance: cleaning, sorting, washing, and dressing. Yet these chores take on emblematic significance in terms of weekly, monthly, and yearly cycles of time and meaningful endeavor. In Midwestern depictions, such chores structure human experience and become "sources of comfort and personal power" (Brown and Stevenson 185). Mama is content to let life float over and around her: "I don't like things to think about. I like things to go on" (52). But Jessie maintains lists, buys birthday presents, and orders supplies and medications in advance. And whereas Mama retreats to panic and theatrics when things don't go her way, Jessie remains calm and directed virtually throughout.

Another characteristically Midwestern theme appears in Jessie's dislike of social pressure. She complains that her brother doesn't know her: "He's always wondering what I do all day. I mean, I wonder that myself, but it's my day, so it's mine to wonder about, not his" (23). A more serious charge claims that the family "know too much": "They know things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know it or not" (23). Jessie feels oppressed by relations who criticize her unconventional attitudes and behavior. According to Mama, even her father "said you were a runt and he said it from the day you were born and he said you didn't have a chance" (48). Her story enacts not the conventional Southern celebration of eccentricity but social intolerance more typical of *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Jessie and her mother do share gallows humor, which joins truth-telling and artifice in one trope. Not long after Jessie announces her intention to do herself in, Mama issues a rhetorical volley: "You'll miss. You'll just wind up a vegetable. How would you like that? Shoot your ear off?" (17). Ever the "straight man," Jessie deadpans back, "I think I can kill myself, Mama" (17). Later on, Jessie describes telling the grocery store clerk about her "holiday" plans: "They said it was about time, but why didn't I take you with me? And I said I didn't think you'd want to go" (54). Such dark humor manages to bridge the divide between Midwestern and Southern sensibilities.

One of the most interesting and compelling dynamics in *'night, Mother* involves the gradual merging of the two women's epistemological perspectives. About midway through, Jessie begins

truth-telling in earnest, asking Mama, "Did you love Daddy?" (44). "No," she confesses bluntly. Here for the first time, we see Mama acquiring some of Jessie's direct, plain language, without equivocation. From that point Mama's evolution continues in fits and starts, but truth gradually and inevitably takes over. She reveals that Daddy never went fishing at all: "His tackle box was full of chewing tobacco and all he ever did was drive out to the lake and sit in his car" (49). Going further, she begins assertively interrogating Jessie. Eventually, she tells Jessie that her ex-husband, Cecil, "had a girl" (57) on the side and, after insistent prodding, describes for the first time the history and physical details of her daughter's epileptic seizures since childhood.

As Mama opens herself up to greater emotional honesty, Jessie evolves in the opposite direction, leading to a new convergence between the two. Having advocated throughout for blunt honesty, late in the play she turns to constructing a narrative grounded in artifice:

Now, somebody's bound to ask you why I did it and you just say you don't know. That you loved me and you know I loved you and we just sat around tonight like every other night of our lives, and then I came over and kissed you and said, "Night, Mother," and you heard me close my bedroom door and the next thing you heard was the shot. And whatever reasons I had, well, you guess I took them with me. (81)

This narrative paints a false portrait of the interaction the audience has just witnessed; it aims to obfuscate, to forestall questioning, and to deny information. Mama might earlier have constructed such a narrative. But as justification, Jessie claims, "Tonight is private, yours and mine, and I don't want anybody else to have any of it" (82).

Mama's anguish at the end approaches the closest to truth-telling she has ever gotten, but Jessie rejects any further extension of their time together: "We wouldn't have more talks like tonight, because it's this next part that's made this last part so good, Mama" (75). The very last action of the play enacts a theatrically brilliant symbol of their ironic fusion. Mama "*goes to the stove in the kitchen and picks up the hot-chocolate pan and carries it with her to the telephone, and holds on to it while she dials the number.*" These actions follow Jessie's earlier instructions, but Mama holds on to the pan "*tight like her life depended on it*" (89), as rehearsed narrative and emotional honesty become physically bound together at the final curtain.

Much more could be said about the emotional intricacies of this play, but viewed through the regionalist optic, *'night, Mother* offers an extraordinary enactment of cultural tensions that offer no escape. Midwestern and Southern assumptions and predispositions do pitched psychological battle and eventually find some accommodation in gallows humor. Yet the dark comedy only partially redeems: through the trenchant and bracing honesty of the mother-daughter confrontation, related, as Burkman points out, to the Demeter-Persephone myth; and through the presumed—or at least hoped for—awakening of Mama to more purposive and truthful living. Yet the latter outcome remains by no means assured; Mama could, in her emotional pain, retreat to her sweets and her dysfunctional social network. But the playwright has offered us a gripping study of cultural forces at work in an elemental family drama, opening to the audience the usually hidden intimacy of hard truths.

Several important questions remain. One involves the playwright's interest in and awareness of Midwestern literary traditions dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Autobiographically-based characters in a series of William Dean Howells's plays interrogate the hierarchical eastern social establishment from a Midwestern egalitarian perspective. A wide range of later playwrights, from Susan Glaspell and Rachel Crothers in the decades before and after constitutional passage of Woman Suffrage to Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and August Wilson, carried on that tradition. These dramatists paralleled efforts in Midwestern fiction and such seminal non-fiction works as Jane Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), advocating in plain-speaking terms for equality and justice.

Norman's validation of truth-seeking and direct speech is easy to document. In the prefatory notes to *Getting Out*, she confesses her problems in trying to make Arlie, based on a violent girl she met while working in a state mental hospital, consistent with her research into "people kept in long-term solitary confinement" (*Collected* 2). She further confesses, "I wasn't writing about Arlie, I was writing about myself" (3). In the notes to *Circus Valentine*, Norman doesn't shrink from describing the premiere, "a night of humiliation and failure so complete as to almost destroy my ability to remain in the theatre" (*Collected* 110). Perhaps her greatest paean to truth-telling as foundational aesthetic appears in the Introduction to *Third and Oak*:

“These two plays are about the same thing: why we die to protect ourselves when we could tell the truth and be saved” (*Collected* 60). The redemptive potential of honest enquiry appears at greater length and with particular resonance in the later *'night, Mother*.

Although her speech at Kenyon College in May 1998 is laced with Midwestern references, particularly in relation to Ohio (*Collected* 398 and ff.), Norman rarely connects her work directly to literary traditions of the heartland. Nonetheless, such influences are noticeable. Leslie Kane points out Norman's affinities with two American playwrights, Sam Shepard and Lanford Wilson (256). Shepard was born and spent his first ten years in Illinois, a legacy reflected in *Buried Child* and *Chicago*, and has returned from the West to live in Minnesota. The resonance of Norman's aesthetic with *Buried Child* is particularly striking. Lanford Wilson's grounding in the Midwest is more direct and substantive; his prize-winning trilogy of the Talley plays is set in central Missouri and celebrates small-town Midwesternness, while *The Mound Builders* explores Native American heritage in Southern Illinois.

Interestingly, at the conclusion of her essay, Lane quotes from a 1983 interview the playwright conducted with Mel Gussow. Apparently from memory, Norman cites a line from Theodore Roethke, “You learn by going where you have to go!” as part of her conviction that “from darkness comes understanding” (Kane 273). Roethke was born and grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, attended the University of Michigan, and taught in the Midwest before moving to the University of Washington in Seattle in his later years. That she quotes his work with seeming affection indicates that Marsha Norman retains affinities with Midwestern writers, even as she also cherishes her Southern connections.

Norman's relative lack of emphasis on Midwestern influences most likely can be traced to the borderland sensibility of northern Kentucky, which partakes of some features of its regional neighbor to the north through cross-fertilization. *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* depicts Southern culture as reaching across the Ohio River into southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois (Wilson and Ferris 534). In a reverse dynamic, the Midwest bleeds into Kentucky, West Virginia, and other neighboring states, as one can determine by comparing *'night, Mother* or *Getting Out* to a work like *Crimes of the Heart* from the Deep South.

Further corroboration of the bi-regional consciousness of the area emerges from a careful reading of Louisville social and economic history.

The Deep South of Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* offers a useful comparison to Marsha Norman's borderland aesthetic. *Crimes* takes place in Hazlehurst, Mississippi "five years after Hurricane Camille" (n.p.). It focuses on three women in a period of duress, and the central dynamic involves both a crime and suicide. However, beyond that the similarities end. Henley's play features a good deal of gothic humor, a clearly hierarchical social structure with at least three levels, and a home with ancestral implications. *Crimes of the Heart* is clearly a Southern work focusing not on direct speech or ruthless investigation but instead on colorful, elaborate, grotesque stories and dialogue that evoke humorous incongruity and emotional dislocation. Even given that Henley's play is a comedy, her world-view in this and other plays lacks Norman's penchant for fearless rhetorical enquiry.

Not that *Crimes of the Heart* does not include investigation. Babe's shooting of her husband Zachery, who has discovered her sexual affair with a young black man named Willie Jay, leads to interrogation, both by her lawyer and by her older sister, Meg. But the interrogation is off-hand, meandering, indirect:

MEG: I knew you couldn't have done it! I knew it!
BABE: No, I shot him. I shot him all right. I meant to kill him. I was aiming for his heart, but I guess my hands were shaking and I—just shot him in the stomach. (32)

This is confession rather than interrogation. A few speeches later, Babe consoles herself, "Don't worry, Meg, jail's gonna be a relief to me. I can learn to play my new saxophone" (33). *Crimes of the Heart*, like Henley's work in general, explores many cultural complexities of Southern life; but the dialogue and action lack what Brown and Stevenson call "fearlessly 'looking under the bed'" (182), a central Midwestern characteristic of Norman's oeuvre.

The history of Louisville provides important clues for understanding the hybrid sensibility of this borderland region. In the late eighteenth century, clashes developed between speculators from Virginia and a "small army of settlers" from across the Alleghenies (Yater 28). By the mid-nineteenth century, Louisville had become an industrial center for railroad as well as riverboat trade, by 1850 "the tenth largest city in the

United States” (Yater 61). During the years leading up to the Civil War, anti-slavery sentiment was stoked by European immigrants like Karl Heinzen, and during the war itself, Louisville “stood in unhappy indecision, pulled both ways” (Yater 65, 82). Eventually, “Louisville chose the Union, but wanted to avoid war” (Yater 83), a perfect example of cultural hybridity that Robert C. Young describes as “making one of two distinct things” (26). In subsequent decades, labor unrest in the city came to resemble that of the industrial Midwest. The first Ohio River bridge was built in 1870, and by 1895, three bridges spanned the river, solidifying Louisville’s position as a nexus between Midwest and South (Yater 141).

This composite positioning resonates not only in the work of Marsha Norman but also in the writer with whom she has perhaps most in common, Wendell Berry, despite the latter’s resolutely rural sensibility. For almost four decades, Berry has written poems and essays from his homestead in Henry County, northeast of Louisville, near the confluence of the Kentucky and Ohio rivers. Like Norman, Berry combines the Midwestern penchant for probing, practical interrogation with a Southern validation of multi-generational family and community traditions. Although he works in different literary genres, his signature method wields ruthless enquiry in the service of historical continuity in a way similar to Norman’s. In the field of playwriting, Lanford Wilson seems the closest kindred spirit, whose family home in rural south central Missouri combines Midwestern plain-speaking and practicality with a Southern tradition of historical and social continuity.

'night, Mother represents the best dramatic incarnation we have of the borderland hybridity of Louisville and the northern South. In an area of the country torn during the Civil War between sympathy with Union abolitionism and solidarity with the Confederacy, Marsha Norman has forged a bi-regional vision of American life, incorporating uncompromising Midwestern truth-telling with Southern historical continuity. Her borderland sensibility has brought something new to American theatre that differs from other bi-regional dramatists like William Inge in southeastern Kansas and Lanford Wilson in south-central Missouri. Norman’s plays do not reflect the impulse to “light out for the territory” in *Picnic* or *Bus Stop*; nor do her characters find solace in the regenerative rhythms of nature and communal life evident in Wilson’s Talley trilogy. In *'night, Mother*, we witness a clear-eyed, probing

interrogation of bi-regional assumptions and predispositions that interpenetrate but do not clearly resolve. Like the best work of Wendell Berry, Marsha Norman's ruthless dramatic enquiry continues to challenge assumptions and call contemporary mores to account on behalf of human survival.

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