

An Interview with

BETH HENLEY

March 10, 1981

Interviewed by

John Jones

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AU 564  
OH 1981.07  
OHP 369

Interviewee: Henley, Beth  
Interviewer: Jones, John

Title: An interview with Beth Henley, March 10, 1981 / interviewed by  
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JONES: This is John Jones with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and I'm about to interview Beth Henley. We are at Beth's mother's house. This is where you grew up?

HENLEY: Well, after the fourth grade I moved here.

JONES: Right. It's a house on Avondale in Jackson, Mississippi. Today is Tuesday, March 10, 1981. As I told you before we cut the tape recorder on, Beth, I just wanted to get some basic biographical data first, if you could tell me something about your early life, when and where you were born, your schooling and things like that.

HENLEY: I was born in Jackson on May 8, 1952. I went to St. Andrew's Day School for the first through the third grade, and then I went to Duling Elementary School, and then I went to Bailey Junior High School.

JONES: Did you?

HENLEY: Yes, did you go there?

JONES: Yes.

HENLEY: I went to Murrah. That's all in Mississippi. Then I went to S.M.U. in Dallas for four years. Then I did one year of graduate work at the University of Illinois.

JONES: In what?

HENLEY: In acting.

JONES: Theatre arts, yes. Did you act all through high school?  
Were you in the Murrah players, or whatever?

HENLEY: No. I wasn't even in the Thespians. I'm surprised.  
When I look back now, most of my friends were in the  
Thespians, but I never was.

JONES: When did you get interested in it?

HENLEY: Well, I did some plays at New Stage. I went to a class  
that they had there. I can't remember if I was actually  
in a play there. Yes, I was. Oh, gosh. What's that  
one I did with John Maxwell?

GENO: I can't remember.

HENLEY: Stop The World.

JONES: Let me mention this: With Beth and me are Chrissy Wilson  
from the Department, and C. C. Geno, Beth's sister.  
You did this play when you were in college?

HENLEY: In high school.

GENO: And you were in Summer And Smoke when you were little.

HENLEY: Right. I did Summer and Smoke when I was in the fifth  
grade.

JONES: We'll talk more about that. Are your family roots in  
Hazlehurst and Brookhaven, the settings of Crimes of  
the Heart and Miss Firecracker?

HENLEY: Right. My mother's family is from Brookhaven and my  
father's family is from Hazlehurst.

JONES: I see. You still have family there now?

HENLEY: Yes, in both places. My grandmother still lives in Hazlehurst, and some of my cousins and an uncle, my father's brother and his wife. And then in Brookhaven, my mother's mother and some great-uncles and aunts and cousins, and an uncle lives there.

JONES: That's interesting. And you would visit there a lot when you were growing up, spend summers there and things?

HENLEY: We'd go down there a lot on the weekends, go down for the holidays.

JONES: So you went to S.M.U. for four years?

HENLEY: Right.

JONES: I have some newspaper clippings written about you, and in those articles I read that that was where you took your first playwriting course.

HENLEY: Yes.

JONES: Your last year?

HENLEY: No, it was my second year.

JONES: I'm interested to get you to describe for the tape by what process you finally decided to sit down and write. Had you been thinking about it your whole life?

HENLEY: No. I wanted to write, I think, when I was in junior high school, but then I started reading books and I said, "No way. I could never write." It was just too

hard. I wasn't even that hot in English, in grammar and spelling and stuff. Then I took a playwriting course just like you take theatre history or lighting design. It was something I thought would be fun. You had to write a play to pass, so I wrote that play.

JONES: What play?

HENLEY: Am I Blue is the name of it. It's a one act.

JONES: And that was your first try?

HENLEY: Well, in the sixth grade I wrote a play that we tried to produce. Other than that, I was in a creative writing course in junior high school, and I remember having to read my story in front of the class. I said, "But I'm not finished," and they said, "Ah, go on and read it anyway, 'cause nobody's written anything anyway." So I got up to read and I was about half-way finished and it wasn't sounding like I wanted it to sound like. I smashed it up and threw it in the trash and ran out of the class crying. Like I thought I was really going to get in trouble, but the teacher felt so sorry for me she didn't say anything.

JONES: So that was your first production.

HENLEY: Yes, in that creative writing class.

JONES: Was Am I Blue ever staged?

HENLEY: Yes. My senior year - I'd written it my sophomore year -

my senior year they were doing Rick Bailey's play called Badlands at the time, I think he's changed it to The Bridgehead, and they needed a companion piece to go on the bill with it. Jill Peters was a director there, and she was looking through all the old one acts that had been written and she found mine. She said, "This is the most together play I've come across, so why don't we do it?" So I did a few rewrites on it and they did it to fill out the evening.

JONES: Hm. Have you ever or have you yet tried prose or poetry? Is playwriting your only creative concern?

HENLEY: No, I haven't tried them yet. I don't know if I could do them. I used to write some poetry when I was a freshman. We'd all sit down and see who could write the grossest poetry, weird poems. But that's all I did. I did that when I was a freshman. I still don't have good grammar for putting like a whole novel or whole story together. I can just write dialogue.

JONES: Do you think that's something you'd like to try? Certainly you have the ear and the eye.

HENLEY: To write like a novel or something?

JONES: To write prose.

HENLEY: I might try that. It would be a relief because once you finished it and somebody published it you wouldn't

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have to worry about it anymore. With a play that's where your problems just begin.

JONES: Yes. Tell me after Am I Blue came, Crimes of the Heart was your next one?

HENLEY: Well, I wrote the book for a musical my first year after I was out of S.M.U. A friend of mine who's a really talented musician wanted to write a musical, and said, "I really like that play you wrote, so why don't you write the book for this?" So I said okay. I was working at horrible jobs all the next year after I graduated. So I wrote the book for the musical at that time, and the students did it right before I left for Illinois. It was fun because I had never been around musicians that much. It was a 1940s musical called Parade. It was a real exciting thing to do.

JONES: What is the book?

HENLEY: The book. That's just the dialogue. There's a composer and a lyricist. Somebody writes the music, somebody writes the lyrics to the music, and I wrote the lines the people actually say in between the songs.

JONES: Oh, yes. Tell me something about the genesis of Crimes of the Heart.

HENLEY: Okay. I was out in Los Angeles, I was trying to act. It was so hard trying to get a job out there. I had

an acting agent, but she'd never call you up and I'd sit at home all day long. She was reduced to working at the Broadway Department Store and making calls on her lunch hour. I was working with a group of actors out there, among them Rick Bailey the playwright, and I thought I'd just write a play with parts for people around our age and we can do it as a showcase out there. I thought I may as well do something while I was sitting out there. I'd written a screenplay when I first got out there, so I was kind of in the habit of writing.

JONES: What happened to the screenplay?

HENLEY: The screenplay is called The Moonwatcher. It takes place in Illinois, which is from when I worked there, and it's about a girl who's kind of at a crisis in her life. She's been jilted by the boy that she's in love with. She's going to have his baby but he marries somebody else and she has to give up her baby. Now she's all confused. Now, just before I left Los Angeles to go to Dallas, there was a lady who'd read the screenplay and she really liked it and is interested in it, so I'm glad it didn't just die. I thought it was kind of dead. I don't know if anything will happen to it.

JONES: What's the difference in writing a screenplay and writing a play?

HENLEY: I don't know. That screenplay was really just one of those gifts, you know, just came to me image after image. It seems it was a lot easier to write than any play I ever wrote because you can just say something very quickly and very vividly and move on to something else. I really enjoyed writing it, but it's just so impossible. For two years after I wrote that I couldn't get anybody to read it, much less consider producing it - you know, millions of dollars. With a play you can feasibly do it on your own. At the time that was a consideration. I wanted something that could be done.

JONES: What years are we talking about when you were in L.A. and looking for work?

HENLEY: Okay. I left Illinois the fall of 1976 and moved to Los Angeles. Let's see. My play, Crimes of the Heart, wasn't done in Louisville until 1979, so that's that many years of destitution.

JONES: Goodness. What were you doing out there during this time, besides writing?

HENLEY: Working at temporary jobs that I hated, trying to avoid work.

JONES: Did you ever get any work as an actress?

HENLEY: No, I didn't, come to think of it. I worked in a workshop, but I never got any work.

JONES: Out there with some people that you knew from S.M.U. or from Illinois?

HENLEY: Yes, some people from Texas, some people who were at S.M.U. ahead of me were out there.

JONES: When did you - I'm asking too many chronological questions. It's like a history test. We'll talk about the other in a minute. When did you decide to sit down and write Crimes of the Heart?

HENLEY: Let's see. I wrote that in seventy-. . .Daddy died in 1978. That was right before I finished it. I wrote it in 1978.

JONES: How long did it take you?

HENLEY: It only took me three months to write the first draft. I had to do a lot of rewrites on it, a rewrite every production. I had to do one rewrite before it went to Louisville, and then one during rehearsals at Louisville, and then for all the other productions I've worked on it.

JONES: Were these full-fledged rewrites or just cutting?

HENLEY: Just mainly cutting. Like the major cut I've done is cut Uncle Watson out. I don't know if you have a script with Uncle Watson in it. I had to cut him out for the New York production. That's just like a page and a half really. But, no, the characters have remained the

same. The end is what I've had to work on. It's really pretty much intact. I've added some and subtracted some.

JONES: Did it hurt your feelings when they asked you to cut your play?

HENLEY: No. I was overly eager at first, because I was so happy to be having it done. I was just a slave to trying to please them. I was just the opposite. Now I'm not so much.

JONES: Now you have your own opinions about it.

HENLEY: Right.

JONES: Will you tell me why you sat down and wrote it, what inspired you?

HENLEY: You mean the idea?

JONES: Well, yes.

HENLEY: I kind of had two different ideas. One was based on my grandfather, my father's father, had gotten lost in the woods in Hazlehurst. They called up. I didn't go home. I was in Dallas at the time. For three days he was lost in the woods. They had picnic tables out there, and helicopters. In the Copiah County paper they had like, "Thirty foot snake found in the search for W. S. Henley!" And they had paratroopers. . .

GENO: The National Guard.

HENLEY: The National Guard. The governor came down. It was just a huge deal. People were out on horseback, people were out on foot.

GENO: The Coca-Cola people came in their trucks and advertised free cokes.

HENLEY: Did you go down there?

GENO: Yes.

HENLEY: Anyway, my grandfather was just walking through the woods, and according to him was never lost. He knew where he was: Copiah County. He found this little shack.

JONES: So did that find him?

HENLEY: He got to this little shack, and these people brought him into town and they got to a gas station where some people were saying, "They're gonna find that old man, but he'll be dead." And he said, "No they are not! Here I am alive!" So he returned alive after three days. So I thought that would be a good idea for a play: a family crisis bringing everybody back home. It was too close or something, anyway I couldn't get a bead on writing a play about my grandfather getting lost in the woods. I had that idea: a family and everybody gets back home. Also I heard this story about Walter Cronkite was sitting up on the front porch

of these rich peoples' house in the South, and this little black kid came up and said he wanted ice cream, and the man came down and socked him in the face and said, "Don't you ever come around to this front door again." That made such an impression on him. I thought, "God, I'd like to kill somebody for just being cruel like that to some innocent person." So that kind of gave me the idea of Zackery beating up on Willie Jay. I thought it would be interesting to write about a character who tries to kill somebody, but you'd be in their corner rather than in against them. So I kind of combined those two ideas. I guess that's what started it.

JONES: You said you were hesitant to write about your grandfather being lost in the woods in Covich County because it is too close to you. My question is how much of your writing is bits and pieces of what you have heard, your memory, and how much is imagination?

HENLEY: I don't know if I could say a percentage.

JONES: No.

HENLEY: But some of the things I might not have heard from my family but have heard from other people in Texas or even in New York that I transposed down to the South, to Mississippi; or even in Los Angeles because that's

where I live now. But a lot of them are from stories I've really heard, more in Miss Firecracker than Crimes of the Heart. I totally made that up about being hung with the cat. I never knew anyone who would shoot their husband because they didn't like their looks, and then go fix lemonade. I made all that up. I don't really.

JONES: I know that's kind of a nebulous question. Chrissy and I were talking about that on the way over here. Are there things as a writer that you won't touch, that are too close? Do you feel that as a writer you are able to deal with any emotion of anybody, you can use any family history, that everything is open to you because you're an artist? Or are you shy about talking about certain things?

HENLEY: I think I would prefer to disguise certain things, you know, instead of. . .I've put some things in my plays and I wondered how people would react. Usually they don't even remember saying them or doing them or something like that. For some reason I don't like to get too factual, because it's too confining. It's easier for me to deal with that area of fiction where you're not stifled by having to adhere to "I'm going to write this story to really show how my father was, or my grandmother was."

JONES: Right.

HENLEY: I don't think I really answered your question. I guess if it's something really good I don't feel that bad about putting it in, you know. I'll just stick it in there. I don't think I've hurt anybody's feelings so far. People always like to read themselves into your work. When it was about three sisters my sisters assumed it was going to be about them and our lives and everything. They were kind of surprised when they saw it: "That's nothing like me!"

JONES: Right. How has your family treated your success as a playwright? Do they like your work?

HENLEY: Oh, they love it. My mother has come up for practically all my productions. C. C. came up to New York with her husband. My mother and her new husband came up to New York. My father was the only one who didn't like it. He died before I ever made any money. I hadn't done anything and he was like, "What are you doing? You should go back to secretarial school and learn to type faster."

JONES: Yes. Your father was a Mississippi State Senator, Charles Henley.

HENLEY: Right. Charles Henley.

JONES: And he died in 1978?

HENLEY: Right.

JONES: Before Crimes of the Heart.

HENLEY: Right

JONES: I want to ask you something just to get your reaction to it. We don't necessarily have to include this in the transcript. My mother was talking with your mom about your success, and they were kidding like they do, and your mom was saying that your new play The Wake was based on the death of your father and the fact that his family took a long time to bury him, which was a matter of great pain for her. They were joking, you know. Was - did you write it based on your experiences at that time?

HENLEY: It's not based on any actual experience that I had at that time, except for the experience. It was definitely based on that. We were thinking then, "Gosh, this would make a great play." It was so interminable! All the family was together, and there was all this tension and all these raw emotions. That makes for a good play, I think. You know, people have an excuse to drink and an excuse to scream and an excuse to act their fullest. I thought that would be a real good idea for a play. There's not tons of similarities - I would say there are no similarities between the actual

thing here. It was much grimmer than my play. My play's a real comedy. Here it was just really a drag. Maybe if you were in the play you'd look at it as a drag. I don't know.

JONES: And the guy in the play actually dies from getting kicked in the head by a mule.

HENLEY: A cow.

JONES: Right. Well, when you finished Crimes of the Heart, did you know you had something there? Had you read extensively in the plays that have come out over the last ten years and know that yours was something new in the art?

HENLEY: I remember I was a T.R.W. in the parts department, back there after I'd written it. I had taken off from work to try to finish it; you know, temporary work. I thought, "Oh, God, I'll probably be doing this till I'm eighty." I didn't know. I mainly read old things. I missed a lot of reading when I was young, so I like to read more classical stuff. I don't read tons of contemporary plays. I didn't really know what the score was. I didn't even know they weren't doing three-act plays anymore. They told me, "They're not doing three-act plays anymore," and I went "They're not? Wow! Back when I was reading plays they were doing

them." So I was real surprised that people liked it as much as they did.

JONES: You showed it to friends first. I know the story of your friend sending it to Louisville to the 1979 competition. So what happened then? Did you immediately get an agent? What happened to it after it was recognized?

HENLEY: Well, we had a reading at my house. It was real fun and went well. Then a friend of mine who was at the reading, her agent was trying to start a literary department out in Los Angeles. My agent, Gilbert Parker, was coming in to visit. He didn't have any scripts to read, so my friend told her agent, "Well, give him this of my friend's. It's really good." So she gave it to her agent who gave it to Gilbert. This was before it was done in Louisville. I got in that night and there was a message on my phone machine to call him. I didn't even know who he was. I didn't know who his clients were. "Mark Medoff, now I know he's written something. Paul Zindel?" He thought I was brainless beyond belief. It was so embarrassing. He got off the phone and said, "How can she write such good plays and be so. . ." I don't know if he said, "ignorant." So then he was my agent. He's real nice. He's a good

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agent. He just liked it from reading it.

JONES: I've also read where you said you wrote the play with the intention of playing the part of Babe in a production of it. Any truth in that?

HENLEY: That was in the production we were going to do. They had that publicity that I was going to give myself a part. I was kind of embarrassed by that statement. But I did have in mind with the cast we were going to have that I would play Babe. Now I'm so old I probably couldn't play Lenny. That is true.

JONES: Let me ask you this: people that I've talked to have said that acting and writing is really much the same insofar as you're under the spotlight and if it's good it sticks, is remembered. Being an actress do you think it was any easier for you to write?

HENLEY: Being an actress really helped me writing plays particularly. It is the same for me in a sense. You just get into a character, and what that character wants, what are their greatest dreams, their greatest fears, what would they feel at this moment or in this scene, you can both determine. As a writer I can play a fifty-three-year-old man, or I can play a tall brunette woman, you know, as many characters as you want. The pleasure of writing is when you write, and the hell of

it is to go into rehearsals. With acting your creative work is in rehearsals. It's more immediate.

JONES: Yes. In the reviews I read some critic likened like Babe to a character out of Flannery O'Connor, Meg to a, I believe he says a benign Tennessee Williams, and then Lenny from Chekhov. Are those people you've read, and did you do that consciously?

HENLEY: I hadn't read Flannery O'Connor. Like, in my first review in Louisville they compared me to her. I hadn't read her. Now I love her. I think she's great. I had read Tennessee Williams and Chekhov, and I think they're great. Now, what did you ask me?

JONES: If you drew that parallel consciously, or if that tradition meant anything to you when you sat down to write?

HENLEY: Chekhov and Shakespeare, of course, are my favorite playwrights. Chekhov, I feel he influenced me more than anyone else, just with getting lots of people on stage. I don't do anything close to what he does with orchestration. That fascinates me. I also like how he doesn't judge people as much as just shows them in the comic and tragic parts of people. Everything's done with such ease, but it hits so deep. So I guess I've got to say he influenced me more than I guess anybody.

JONES: What about the literary tradition of Mississippi, certainly with fiction. A lot of the humor you use in the two plays I've read is taking that Gothic Southern heritage and turning it upside down, you know, with the mother who hangs her cat and then herself. Do you take that old Southern eccentricity as something you are trying to satirize? Are you really conscious of that?

HENLEY: Well, I didn't consciously like say that I was going to be like Southern Gothic or grotesque. I just write things that are interesting to me. I guess maybe that's just inbred in the South. You hear people tell stories, and somehow they are always more vivid and violent than the stories people tell out in Los Angeles. It's always so mellow.

JONES: Right. Do you think you would have been a playwright had you grown up - there's really no way to answer that - say in California? Is your real inspiration here in Mississippi?

HENLEY: I don't think I'd be writing the same type of plays, but I'm not saying California is devoid of inspiration. The poet Charles Bukowski writes very well about Los Angeles. The South just suits me better.

JONES: Can you write when you're here in Mississippi?

HENLEY: No. I can't even breathe. I get hay fever every time I come here.

JONES: You really can't write?

HENLEY: I can take a few notes or something like that, but there is no way I could sit down and write in my parents' house. It's so in-and-out, you know, and there's too much going on to sit down and write.

JONES: When you come to Mississippi do you go to Brookhaven and Hazlehurst and visit the people?

HENLEY: I go to Hazlehurst all the time. I was there Sunday. But I don't go to Brookhaven as often.

JONES: I wanted to get you to describe what inspires your characters, your characterizations. Is it the small Southern town that interests you so? Is it something else?

HENLEY: I don't know, because Jackson's not really that small a Southern town. It's the one I grew up in. It's not a large metropolis. I think it's that in a small Southern town there's not that much to detract from looking at characters. If you live in Los Angeles there's just so much going on that you can't write about it. But here things are small and Southern and insular, and you get a bird's-eye view of peoples' emotions. I don't know if that's a good answer.

JONES: It is. Will you always return to Mississippi in your writing?

HENLEY: I'm really not sure. My next play takes place in the

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South, in Jackson, if I ever get to writing on it. But I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to write about Los Angeles, or if that will interest me. I just don't know. I like to write about the South because you can get away with making things more poetic. The style can just be stronger. If I could figure it out I'm sure I could do it with anyplace, but I haven't.

JONES: You've been in New York for a while. Does the cultural world still think things Southern are neat?

HENLEY: I haven't really spent a lot of time in New York because my play only ran five weeks. I was there for the rehearsals and for a few days. There were no lines of people dying to find out about me by any means. I'm not really sure about New York because I was there for only a short time.

JONES: Your play is going to run on Broadway next season?

HENLEY: Right. In the fall.

JONES: Let me get you to talk to this too: John Simon said that the only fear he had was that your play Crimes of the Heart came from a stockpile of youthful memories, and that there was a chance - I know you remember him saying that - and that there was a chance that you would not be able to come up to what that play is ever again. What do you think about that?

HENLEY: Well, I was just glad I'd finished those two other plays

by that time so I didn't panic and be in total distress. I don't think Crimes of the Heart was as autobiographical as he was implying. It's true I'm from Mississippi, and I have two sisters, but my mother isn't dead with suicide, my sister hasn't shot her husband, you know, my sister doesn't have a missing ovary. All the characters were imaginary. I guess it is biographical in the sense that they were sisters and they are from Mississippi.

JONES: He also said, or others have said, that it is a play about adversity being triumphed over by unity and a family coming together. I've read where you said that, and then said, "I guess that's the theme of the play, that's what they tell me." Was the play defined for you by the critics?

HENLEY: A lot of it really was. It's much easier for me to talk about it after reading my reviews. It was like, "Oh, I see, that's what it's about," because I don't think very thematically. I think more in terms of character and story. I don't necessarily know whether I'm writing it to any end, you know, to any theme. Like, I just found out vaguely what the theme to The Wake might be after we had the reading. I said, "I think I may know what this play's about." See, I didn't know when I was writing it, and watching it made it much more simple.

JONES: Yes. That's one of the reasons I was anxious to talk with you, especially after reading your quote about the theme of Crimes of the Heart. Many of the artists today are so concerned with art for art's sake, you know, having the right lingo when talking about "their art," that it's really great to be able to talk with someone young like you who has maybe not learned all the ropes, and maybe whose art is more spontaneous and real than the rest. You know what I mean? Is that helpful to what you are trying to do? I don't know how to make a question out of it.

HENLEY: Well, I think it's helpful not to be confined by anything at the start, you know, "This is what my play's going to be about." Well, maybe that's not what your play's going to be about, maybe you don't have the vaguest idea, maybe your characters want it to be about something else. Also, I don't like the idea of a playwright sitting there saying, "This is what my play's about," because then everybody says, "Well, if the playwright says this is what it's about then this is what it's got to be about." People can have different viewpoints about it. It can mean different things to different people. If you have it in black and white that that's what you're thinking about, you might not

think that's what it's about if you read it ten years from now. So I really wouldn't like to write down what I think about the theme of my play.

JONES: What about The Miss Firecracker Contest, did that come quickly?

HENLEY: No, that was hard to write. I was doing a lot of traveling then. Before, I didn't have anything to distract me at all. When I was writing Crimes there was no pressure, you know. This was harder to write because I was having to go here and there. And The Wake was even harder. That's too bad.

JONES: You were writing Miss Firecracker during the Louisville time, or was it before that?

HENLEY: No, right when I got back from Louisville I started working on it. I worked for television that summer, so I had to do that for three months. Then in the meantime there had been a production in California of Crimes, and then there was a production in the fall of Crimes that I had to go to. That was in St. Louis. Gosh. Then I got to work on Miss Firecracker. Then I finished it, I think.

JONES: Was the Jackson New Stage production of it the first?

HENLEY: The second. It was done in Los Angeles at a ninety-seat showcase theatre, the Victory Theatre.

JONES: And where is it now?

HENLEY: It's in Dallas.

JONES: Right. So it came harder than Crimes, and The Wake was harder still?

HENLEY: Right. The next one will be impossible. Actually it's not as hard, it's just getting the time and getting your mind in the place of the play. When I got to work on another play my mind goes to work on that play. Then I have to get back and read over all my notes, and that's real boring but I have to do it so my mind will be on the play.

JONES: Did you have something, Chrissy?

WILSON: Yes. I just wanted to ask if you think New Yorkers can appreciate your plays as well as Southerners?

HENLEY: Oh, gosh. I think Southerners would have the edge generally speaking, but I think New Yorkers can enjoy the play. They have, but I do think maybe Southerners have an edge.

WILSON: You said earlier that your characters are not based on your family but maybe a caricature or exaggeration of many Southern families. When New Yorkers go to your play, do you think they think all Southern families are like that, or do you think a lot of Southern families are really like that?

HENLEY: I think a lot of Southern families are really like that. I heard people in the audience of Crimes say, "You know, my sister's just like that. That reminds me just of my sisters." They can relate to it like that. But I don't know.

WILSON: Better than New Yorkers can.

HENLEY: No, that is people from New York.

WILSON: They all think that.

HENLEY: Yes.

JONES: I've read where you said your next play will be about two old friends that meet in the restroom of the Stardust Ballroom during an Iggy Pop concert. That's your California play.

HENLEY: Yes. I've been trying to work that out in my brain.

JONES: Don't have anything down about it yet?

HENLEY: I have a few notes on it. I think that would be fun to write about. I could write about that, if I could just find the right tone to do it so it wouldn't be commenting on it or taking it lightly. You know, I'd like to make it real.

JONES: You would take it seriously?

HENLEY: Yes. You know, I've got to get to where I can understand the people enough to take them seriously and not make fun of them, figure out why they are doing that.

JONES: Why they are at an Iggy Pop concert with green hair.

HENLEY: Yes, why people become punkers.

JONES: I'd like to read that.

HENLEY: Yes.

JONES: Is that pretty much sweeping California? I know Steve, your boyfriend, is involved with a punk rock band.

HENLEY: Right. I don't know if he calls it punk rock, but I do. It's really a rock-and-roll band, the L.A. Slugs.

JONES: A good punk name.

HENLEY: Yes. They're real good.

JONES: Is he out there now?

HENLEY: No, he's here.

JONES: Yes, I've been seeing somebody wandering around. I thought that might be him.

HENLEY: Yes.

JONES: What about your success? I know it's changing your life, but is it changing the things you want to do? Will playwriting replace acting as your ambition?

HENLEY: Well, I would like to be able to do both. Like, I'm going to work in a play when I get back out to L.A. Writing is probably - it just gives you so much more freedom, because you can sit down there and you can create all this stuff and you don't have to worry about somebody writing a part that's right for you, casting

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you in it, casting other people that are good in it. You need so much to really make things work artistically as an actor. I mean, just getting cast at all is a miracle, much less in a part that you give a damn about. So I would like to write and just act in situations that I know would have some importance to me, rather than just beating my brains out to get a commercial.

WILSON: Beth, could you compare your satisfaction with the production here of Miss Firecracker and the Broadway production?

HENLEY: Well, they're two different plays.

WILSON: Yes, but I meant just as far as the quality of the production.

HENLEY: Well, I'll tell you, I was more satisfied with my production here with Miss Firecracker than I was with the one in New York. It's surprising. I really think it has a lot to do with having Southern actors in a play. It's such an edge they have to get in understanding these people that I just didn't see in the New York production - it was very Yankee stoic in many ways, instead of just bursting with the passion of these people. I didn't like that at all. I worked to change it, and it did improve. I just think on the whole that down here was much more fun. The show was more my vision

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than it actually ended up being in New York. The structure was all fine in New York. It just lacked some of the blood.

JONES: Is it hard as a playwright working with directors to get your vision across?

HENLEY: It's real hard. It really is.

JONES: You being young and female I was wondering if you'd gotten any condescension.

HENLEY: Oh, yes! I think anyone would get condescension from directors. So many of them are so insecure. I never realized it, but their jobs are really in jeopardy all the time. The producers can fire them. It's harder to get a job as a director than as an actor. They've got all sorts of responsibilities. I've had general good relations with the directors. But if you get on their bad side then you better forget it. They won't listen to anything you say, because they don't have to. I never have had power enough to get a director fired, because usually the director is more of a name than me, or is the producer. I try to get along with them, and hopefully be with the director long enough so that we'll have a similar vision of the play.

WILSON: Do you have a say in the casting?

HENLEY: In New York I did. I did here as a matter of fact.

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JONES: What are you going to have to do about the Broadway production, are you cutting it again?

HENLEY: I'm making just a few changes. Probably people who saw it wouldn't even notice them.

JONES: Are you going up there for the casting? Or have they done that?

HENLEY: They haven't cast it. They are trying to get the same three women who did it at the Manhattan Theatre, which would be good because they really are a good ensemble. I mean, regardless of what I said before, they worked well together. And they got good reviews, and nobody wants to tamper with success, especially if the producer really wants to go for the bucks. But they may have other engagements, and you can't book an actor this far in advance according to the rules of Equity. So, we'll have to wait and see if they will accept it again.

JONES: So, is L.A. your permanent home now?

HENLEY: Gosh, I still can't relate to it. I have a Mississippi driver's license, Texas license plates and Illinois car insurance. I refuse to say L.A.'s my home. I can't believe it! But now I think I'd rather live in Los Angeles than New York, just because I have a house with a garden and a car you can drive. I don't know. I guess it is, for a while.

JONES: What about someone like Miss Welty who writes very movingly about us and lives down the road? Do you think you'll ever be able to do that?

HENLEY: I don't know. I may. Right now there's just too much I want to do besides just come back and live here. It would just be too quiet for me.

JONES: It's not too interesting right now to you.

HENLEY: No, that's not true. It is. I've just got friends in Los Angeles, and it would just be hard to leave. Steve works out there.

JONES: Well. You have anything else, Chrissy? C. C., you have anything else?

GENO: No.

JONES: This has been nice. I appreciate you having us over and talking with us. It's been really interesting.

HENLEY: God. How did it compare with all those other guys? They're probably really eloquent.

JONES: No, it's perfect. That's why I wanted to talk to you. You are the authentic thing, a real creative talent. Thanks again.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by John Jones)

(Final Copy Typed by Janice Wolfe)

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