Maud Mellish Wilson: A Medical Editor’s Story on Stage

Megan Cole

In early 2007, I was asked by the Mayo Clinic to research, write, and perform a one-woman play about its first medical editor, Maud Mellish Wilson. The event was Mayo Heritage Days, a series devoted to connecting the current staffs of Mayo’s three campuses with their history.

During this project, I developed a great admiration for Maud. She was a gentle powerhouse, a compassionate taskmaster, and an intimidating scholar who didn’t boast about her accomplishments.

After the early stages of research, faced with the usual undifferentiated pile of material, I saw that I needed to address questions in three categories: format, focus, and language.

The central question concerning **Format** was this: Because I would be performing in the first person, as Maud, how was I to get the important information across without doing violence to what Maud herself would have been experiencing at any given moment? How, in other words, could I dramatically express this woman without being too didactic?

I looked at a few other plays about real-life figures—The Belle of Amherst and several of Anna Deavere Smith’s dramatic interviews—but this question of context was perplexing at first.

In the end, I decided to have Maud looking back at her life from the perspective of her final illness. She received a diagnosis of abdominal cancer in fall 1932, when she was 70, and she died almost exactly a year later, so she would have had time to reflect. And, knowing what I did about her, I was sure she did reflect, at some length.

The problem was that she disliked writing and rarely wrote anything down. I found the odd business letter to a colleague or a casual note to her husband; otherwise, she was anything but a memoirist.

But her second husband, Louis Blanchard Wilson, wanted to write her history to give to friends after she died. He did in fact do that, and Maud seems even to have contributed to the project during her last year.

So I decided to have Maud address this whole exercise because Louis asked her to, and this approach fit beautifully both with her great love for Louis and with her essential modesty. She was, in fact, exceptionally self-effacing. To the degree that writing her story was difficult, it was largely because I had to rely almost entirely on the reports of others.

Thus, in the play, she looks back at her long, productive life from an angle of repose. And I placed her at home, recovering from exploratory surgery, a choice that allowed me to show the softer sides of Maud that ran parallel to her fierce intellectuality.

Next, the question regarding **Focus** was how to distill the mass of material into a 35-minute play that tells Maud’s story both concisely and imaginatively. And, for that matter, what was the right story?

Not surprisingly, that was a matter of trial and error. I found, for example, that I wanted to tell too much about her hard-scrabble childhood in the Minnesota prairie and about her difficult first marriage. But those took the story away from the right story, which was that Maud Mellish Wilson was at the very center of the Mayo Clinic’s early 20th-century ascendency.

So I learned to focus, with occasional regret, on the facets that showed Maud not only as a brilliant editor but as a woman far ahead of her time, one who raised a fairly traditional position to heights not previously imagined.

Then, for **Language**, I wanted the audience to feel as though they were in Maud’s living room having a chat and to say as they left the space, “I feel as if I know this woman,” something a play can normally accomplish far better than a lecture.

The challenge was in allowing Maud’s speech to be conversational while staying true to the source material. I wanted to imagine, not invent. I wanted to show the personality through the words, but not emphasize the words themselves, which would have sounded stilted and literary.

So I used, for example, as few words as possible to express a given thought, inserted various kinds of parenthetical remarks, and gave Maud a fairly ordinary vocabulary (ordinary for a highly articulate person whose life’s work was words). And I used the actor’s technique of thinking in the moment, apparently unaware of what word comes next.

I also made sure Maud was as humorous as my research had led me to see that she was—an aspect important not only for revealing personality but for helping to make the play entertaining.

I did the research in May 2007, wrote the first drafts over that summer, and submitted the play to Mayo on 1 August, after which some minor rewriting was necessary to bring the piece within the 35-minute limit.

And in early October 2007, the Mayo Clinic presented a fully produced play titled The Mystery of Maud Mellish Wilson to the entire Mayo Clinic staff on all three campuses (Minnesota, Florida, and Arizona). A professional DVD was made of one of the Rochester performances; it can be ordered from the Mayo Clinic Gift Shop (mayoclinicgiftshop@mayo.edu).

The whole project was daunting, exciting, and thoroughly satisfying. I confess, though, that I have yet to tell the kind people at Mayo that this was the first project of its kind that I have ever done.