The Making of a Southern Gothic
By: Naomi Greenberg-Slovin, Dramaturg

The source of inspiration for an author is not determined by time or place but rather by the kindred vibes it arouses. In the case of Beth Henley, her muse is Anton Chekov and the inspiration for Crimes of the Heart was nothing less than Chekov’s play The Three Sisters. You can’t get much further away from Russia than Hazelhurst, Mississippi but the human emotions of love and loss, thwarted expectations and the unbreakable bond between the sisters are universal.

Added to this, the mixture of tragedy and comedy found in both plays, prompted the literary scholar Joanne Karpinski to say that “depth need not be sacrificed to laughter.”

Since the Pulitzer Prize-winning Crimes of the Heart played on Broadway 30 years ago, its popularity has not diminished.

Written in the genre of 20th century literature known as “Southern Gothic,” Beth Henley, the Mississippi-born playwright, spins a tale that captures the very essence of the style.

But she is not alone. Henley, with her Pulitzer Prize in hand, has entered a virtual ‘Hall of Fame’ as her name is added to the roster of some of our most memorable authors, including Tennessee Williams, William Falkner, Thomas Wolfe Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty and Harper Lee – all with roots in the deep South.

So what is it about Southern Gothic that has given it almost a ‘cult’ quality?

The writer Carson McCullers said that the Southern writers tend to juxtapose “the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail.”

However, these writers do even more. As a sub-genre of the lurid, macabre and very dark Gothic fiction that was so popular in England in the late 18th century, Southern Gothic literature uses the same devices to tell its own story.

It holds onto the lurid and grotesque as it deals with human fallibility and self-destructive behavior. According to the writer V. Mark Covington, Southern Gothic represents “characters that feel trapped in their social station, their small town, their families or even their sexuality.”

But the Southern Gothic style has a secret ingredient. It injects a powerful dose of home-grown Southern humor, often exaggerated to the point of being absurd, into the story. The perfect example comes from novelist Pat Conroy. “My mother, Southern to the bone, once told me, ‘All Southern literature can be summed up in these words: On the night the hogs ate Willie, Mama died when she heard what Daddy did to Sister.’”

Beth Henley caught all of this in Crimes of the Heart.
Hand in hand with the Kafkaesque humor, there are circumstances – ranging from the bizarre to the beleaguered – that relentlessly gnaw away at the flawed and hapless characters like the Magrath sisters; one more dysfunctional than the other.

When asked about writing in this particular style, Henley said: “I didn’t consciously say that I was going to be 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.”

But even as Southern Gothic stories, in general, tend to deal with the ostracized and suppressed, the streak of unrestrained humor running through Beth Henley’s Crimes of the Heart, adds an endearing quality to the relationship among the three sisters; particularly in the final scene, there is a gentle poignancy not soon to be forgotten.