

CBT and Carol Mayo Jenkins take 'The Trip to Bountiful'

By George Logan

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Everybody has a Bountiful, something from the deep past that you can't quite give up. Sometimes it's a bar or a song or a person; sometimes it's a dying town in Texas. That universality is a big part of the enduring appeal of *The Trip to Bountiful*. It debuted in 1953 on NBC, believe it or not, with silent-movie star Lillian Gish in the lead role. Since then, *The Trip to Bountiful* has been on Broadway, then off Broadway, then on Broadway again, most recently with an all-black cast with Cicely Tyson as Carrie. It'll be on TV, on the Lifetime Network, on March 8. Along the way, in 1985, it was also a major motion picture, starring Geraldine Page, who even won Best Actress for her portrayal of Carrie. Horton Foote's play seems to be creeping toward the status of American myth. It's surprising that Clarence Brown Theatre has never taken it on before, but they're doing it exactly as they should, with Carol Mayo Jenkins in the lead.

Whether it's a forerunner for another more current film about a stubborn geriatric odyssey that is up for some Oscars would at least be an interesting question to pose in an MFA class. Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* also follows a determined but slightly deluded elder on a lone intrastate quest with a concerned son in hot pursuit.

In this play, Bountiful is a farming community in Texas that, despite a long-ago period of prosperity, didn't quite make it. Bountiful has even fallen off the bus-station maps. For Carrie, trapped with her son and daughter-in-law in Houston, Bountiful is home, but it's also Oz, a destination almost impossible to reach.

Carrie's memories of Bountiful are bittersweet at best. Her husband left her for another woman in Bountiful, and two of her three children died there. It's been 20 years since she's even seen the place, but she's pretty sure she still has friends there. In any case, she has to go.

This production, directed by University of Tennessee theater prof Kate Buckley, is partly an appreciation of Jenkins. Knoxville's most accomplished resident acting professional, Jenkins began her long acting career just across the patio at the Carousel. She later studied acting in London. Since then she has performed alongside several greats, both on and off Broadway. She once worked directly with playwright Edward Albee, who selected her to play the harrowing lead role of Martha in a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But no matter what she does, mainstream America may always remember her best for the five seasons she played the sexy but sensible English teacher Elizabeth Sherwood on the popular prime-time series *Fame*.

Jenkins moved back home in 2001 to teach at UT's theater department, her hometown's closest equivalent to a school of performing arts, not necessarily reprising her TV role. She is much adored by the theater community, and this play is a fine homage, the first of several, we can hope.

Other leads are versatile pro David Brian Alley, as the harried son who means well but would rather not deal with the emotional complexities of family life, and Philadelphia-raised grad student Johanna Dunphy as his self-absorbed, Coca-Cola-swilling control-freak wife, Jessie Mae Watts. Her character is a sort of headlong persona, and thoughtful pauses might be alien to her. Still, it seemed to me that Dunphy's speedy delivery could have been improved by a few quarter rests.

Clarence Brown sets, even of humble scenes, are always impressive, and these scene changes were gracefully elaborate. The shift from the house to the bus station, in particular, was unnecessarily amazing, a work as much of choreography as carpentry. Then a scene on the bus itself was only a simple bench with a minimalist starry rectangle behind, almost like a bit of improv.

Jenkins is a powerful presence onstage, and if there's anything unrealistic about her portrayal, it's the notion that she could be contained by any distracted, bickering couple in a small house. She strikes us as a woman who would go anywhere the hell she wanted to, and moreover one who could get the grocer or anybody else to cash her government check, no matter what her scrawny, conniving daughter-in-law said. In the real world, I suspect, no one would ever be able to tell Carol Mayo Jenkins when to go to bed or what to do with a check.

Maybe the play is the tale of how Carrie found her inner Carol Mayo Jenkins.

I hardly recognized Neil Friedman, Knoxville's Falstaff, known for his comical, often loony portrayals in farces, but here he plays a low-key Texas sheriff. The other actors, mostly grad students, are more than just decor. Utah native Angela Graham plays Thelma, a stranger who seems to understand Carrie better than her family does,

The play isn't an American *King Lear*; it's funny and too kind. Carrie is never friendless. But its resolution is hardly triumphant. It's likely to leave you saying hmmm —as does life.

