

Review: Clarence Brown's "Trip to Bountiful" story of the heart

By Amy McRary

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Carrie Watts is on a journey of distance and the heart in Horton Foote's "The Trip to Bountiful." How invested the Clarence Brown Theatre's opening night audience was in her journey was easily understood Friday. It was in fact audible.

"The Trip to Bountiful" plays at the University of Tennessee theater through March 9. Near the start of the second act, Watts, played to perfection by Carol Mayo Jenkins, gets bad news about an old friend. When the news is delivered, the audience gasped in unison as sad and shocked as the play's heroine. That collective gasp was a clear indication that the story of "Bountiful" directed by UT Associate Theater Professor Kate Buckley had grabbed them. This story of intergenerational conflict and damaged, but not broken, spirits seems familiar. Within that familiarity, the play set in 1853 Texas carries a Southern feel. Foote, likely best known for his screenplay adaptation of "To Kill A Mockingbird," often based his works on family stories and the history of his Texas hometown. But set aside the South and any playgoer still is likely to recognize himself or herself in "Bountiful." Many have or know elderly parents who move in with their children. All of us have felt Carrie's urge to "go home" to where we felt we had "some dignity."

Carrie Watts is an elderly woman who's bitter and irritable after years living in a three-room Houston apartment with her physically and emotionally battered son Ludie Watts and domineering, vain daughter-in-law Jessie Mae Watts. She longs to return to her small hometown of Bountiful, Texas.

"Bountiful" is enhanced by visiting artist Michael Ganio's set design. Consisting mostly of large movable rooms or fake buildings, the pieces transition so well the story never has to pause. A scene on a bus done with one bench and a background projection of the night sky needed no other props.

This is clearly Jenkins' show. The Clarence Brown resident artist is nearly every scene. Her Carrie is a strong, hymn-humming woman with sadness in her heart but resolve in her spirit. When Jenkins cries she just wants to go home, it tugs the audience's heart. But her journey wouldn't be as heartfelt without strong performances from others in the small, well-cast production.

As Ludie, Clarence Brown resident artist David Brian Alley shows the right mix of a man living with a deep sense of never doing enough and the desire for his mother and wife to live in peace. Slowly, Alley reveals Ludie carries his own heartache of what he's lost and never had. Third-year master of fine arts student Johanna Dunphy

is a complete character study of the self-centered Jessie Mae who clashes with her mother-in-law. Dunphy gives the easily disliked Jessie Mae some humanity too. She's loving, if domineering, to Ludie and can be tender, if in very short spurts, to Carrie. She carries her own sense — if a selfish one — of desperation.

As the young bride who befriends Carrie on her trip home, MFA acting candidate Angela Graham has a warm stage presence as a foil to Dunphy's brittle Johanna and a sounding board for Jenkins' Watts. While Neal Friedman as the rural sheriff is in only a few scenes, he portrays well a lawman who balances responsibility with kindness.

Running about two hours plus an intermission, "Bountiful" intertwines character studies, family conflict and everyone's need to belong. When Carrie does gets home, it changes her and her family. As the three main characters leave the stage, the play leaves audience members feeling they've witnessed a familiar story with a realistic, even optimistic, ending.

