

Clarence Brown cast uses subtle techniques to make 'Trip to Bountiful' relatable and realistic

By Amy McRary

Saturday, February 15, 2014

Horton Foote's play "The Trip To Bountiful" starring Carol Mayo Jenkins is performed at the University of Tennessee's Clarence Brown Theatre Feb. 20-March 9. The play tells the story of Carrie Watts, an elderly woman who defies her family in her heartfelt need to see her hometown of Bountiful, Texas, one final time.

Clarence Brown artist-in-residence Jenkins plays the part of Watts, who makes for Bountiful against the wishes of her overprotective son (CBT artist-in-residence David Alley) and her domineering daughter-in-law Jessie Mae Watts (UT master of fine arts student Johanna Dunphy). UT assistant theater professor Kate Buckley directs the play. In press materials Buckley describes "The Trip to Bountiful" as "a journey home, which brings our heroine a sense of dignity and proof that her life was well lived."

The play is one of the works for which Foote, who died in 2009 at age 92, was best known. The native Texan was a Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist and two-time Oscar winner. He won one Oscar for his 1962 screenplay of the now classic "To Kill a Mockingbird" based on Harper Lee's novel. His second Oscar came decades later for his 1983 original screenplay "Tender Mercies." In 1995 his play "The Young Man From Atlanta" earned the Pulitzer for drama.

Foote's frequent literary themes of a person's need for home and a sense of belonging are likely to resonate with those who see "The Trip to Bountiful." But audience members may be less likely to notice the myriad details that help to give the play a sense of place and reality.

For example, it's unlikely playgoers will find anything special about where actor Stuart Matthews, as a bus station ticket man, places a handtruck. And while they'll be intent on the words spoken and emotions expressed by Jenkins and UT MFA student Angela Graham in a first-act scene, they'll likely not note exactly how the two actresses sit on the pretend bus station's hard bench.

Later, they're certain to be emotionally touched when a distraught Jenkins falls into the arms of the town sheriff, played by CBT artist-in-residence Neil Friedman. But they'll not know of the rehearsal discussion and detail that resulted in such an effortless swoon.

Such realistic details were determined by director and cast in a recent rehearsal. The News Sentinel attended the rehearsal as a look into the progress of creating a production. Called a spacing rehearsal, the evening was the first time "Bountiful" actors rehearsed in the Clarence Brown Theatre. Previously, they'd been practicing in a rehearsal hall.

The rehearsal let the actors to familiarize themselves with the stage and the setup. It was a time to adjust blocking and work on spacing between actors. Buckley said it was also a good time for the actors to remember their “vocal energy” to be sure the words they speak are heard in the back of the theater. And it’s time to work on those realistic details in a production that was still a work in progress.

That progress carried a sense of collaboration. Buckley, Jenkins, Graham and stage manager Marissa Ashlyn Raby spent several minutes moving the stage’s bus station bench.

They settled on placing it near the edge of the pretend platform. Jenkins and Buckley determined how Jenkins, as a tired Watts, might stretch on that same bench for a pretend night’s sleep.

“Which way is more comfortable?” Buckley asks Jenkins of two possible positions. “The other way,” says Jenkins. “Then do the other way,” replies Buckley.

And then there’s an exhausted Jenkins’ collapse into Friedman’s arms. At first the pair fall in union to their knees. From her seat in the theater, Buckley stops them.

“I hate going down on the knees. So we’re going to play with that,” she says. After running the scene a few times, the scene is changed so that the pair remain standing. “My knees will thank you,” says Friedman. “Mine too,” agrees Jenkins.

“The Trip to Bountiful” begins with a 7:30 p.m. Feb. 20 preview before its 7:30 p.m. Feb. 21 opening night. Other evening shows are Feb. 22, Feb. 26 through March 1 and March 5 through 8. Sunday 2 p.m. matinees are Feb. 23, March 2 and March 9.

Adult tickets range from \$20 for the preview to \$40 for opening night and \$25 to \$30 for other performances; discounts are available for senior citizens and students. Tickets are at <http://clarencebrowntheatre.com> or 865-974-5161.

‘The Trip to Bountiful’

What: Horton Foote play starring Carol Mayo Jenkins

Where: Clarence Brown Theatre, University of Tennessee

When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 20-22, Feb. 26-March 1, March 5-8; 2 p.m. Feb. 23, March 2 & March 9

Tickets: \$20 adults, \$17 senior citizens/military, \$10 UT faculty/staff, \$12 non-UT student, free UT student for Feb. 20 preview; \$40 adult, \$35 senior/military, \$20 non-UT student, \$10 UT student for Feb. 21 opening night; \$25 adult, \$19 senior/military, \$12 UT faculty/staff or non-UT student, \$5 UT student for Wednesday or Thursday show; \$30 adult, \$25 senior/military, \$15 UT faculty/staff or non-UT student, \$5 UT student for Friday, Saturday or Sunday show at <http://clarencebrowntheatre.com> or 865-974-5161.

