
Theater: *The Trip to Bountiful* and Cicely Tyson Are Tony Favorites

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THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL *** STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE

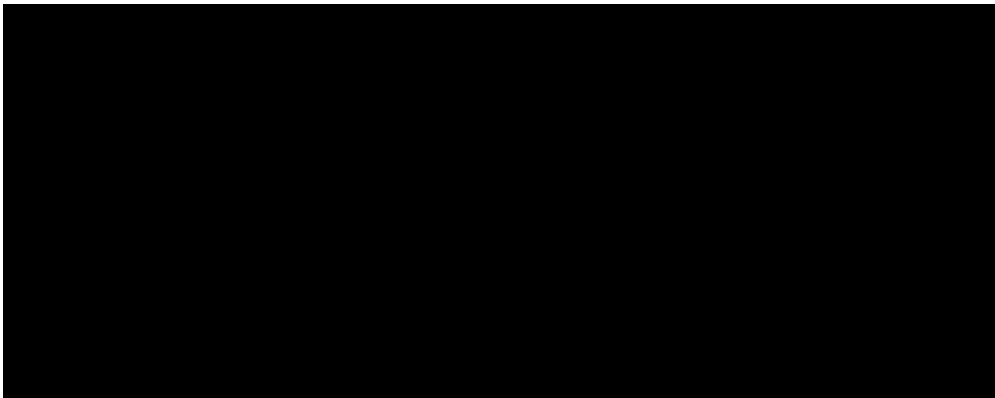
The Tony nominations have just been announced. ([Go here for a complete list of nominees.](#)) If you've seen the new Broadway revival of *The Trip To Bountiful*, you'll be happily surprised to see the voters got it right. They nominated the show for best revival; John Gromada for his strong, subtle sound design; and smartly singled out Condola Rashad (who has been good in everything I've seen her in) for her sparkling turn as a young woman traveling on a bus back home to her family. However, you won't be surprised that Cicely Tyson was nominated for her return to Broadway after 30 years away. The moment she walks on the stage, Tyson owns it; to me, she's the front runner for Leading Actress In A Play, with Kristine Nielsen's even better, show-stopping turn in *Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike* her strongest competition.

Like all of Horton Foote's work, the pleasures of *The Trip To Bountiful* (which began as a TV movie, transferred to Broadway with much the same cast and later became an Oscar-winning feature film) simply deepen and grow with the years. It won't surprise me a bit if 50 or 100 years from now the two playwrights that loom largest from this era are August Wilson and Horton Foote. Wilson serves up pyrotechnics and juicy, scene-stealing monologues while Foote traffics in quiet, gentle moments. But both are deeply rooted in their very respective worlds and both write characters actors love to play.

In this case, Tyson is playing Carrie Watts, an elderly woman living with her son Ludie (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Jessie Mae his vain, difficult bride (Vanessa Williams). They're crowded together in a tiny apartment and living paycheck to paycheck. (Ludie was sick for two years and all their savings were sucked dry.) Tempers can be short, especially because Carrie wants to return home to Bountiful, even though the town is dying. She's run away a few times and made it to the train station, but Ludie always finds her and brings her home. Will that stop her from trying? It will not. This time, Carrie heads to the bus station, meets a sweet young woman named Thelma (Condola Rashad) and they head off on their adventure together.

We're so used to big moments, major plot twists and the like that theater goers will probably spend much of the show anticipating dramatic turns that never arrive. Will Carrie's heart give out? Will the sheriff in the town near Bountiful (Tom Wopat) prove an ugly bigot? Will seeing Bountiful as a ghost town shatter Carrie rather than restore her? Foote is wiser and more powerful than that. He moves us without any soap opera-like shenanigans. By the end, you wonder why other playwrights have to do so much to achieve so little when Foote seemingly does so little to achieve so much.

Bountiful can break your heart -- certainly the film version emphasizes the fact that frail Carrie is accomplishing the last act of her long life when making this journey. Frail is not the word to describe Tyson's take on the role. She's feisty and endearing and indomitable -- you don't doubt for a moment she's going to get exactly where she wants. Just try and stop her.



Director Michael Wilson and the show takes its cue from that performance. This isn't a quiet tear-jerker; it's a warm, happy show with an emphasis on the comedy that is always present in Foote. The early scenes with Carrie and Jessie Mae wrangling with poor Ludie in the middle are funny rather than awkward and difficult, the way I've seen it done before. This production may not aim as high as some I've seen, but it fully achieves what it sets out to do and gives a glossy, crowd-pleasing spin to what's always been seen as a more fragile, delicate piece.

Tyson is wonderful as Carrie, whether clapping her hands and singing hymns (and convincing everyone around her to join in) or quietly taking in the beauty of a sunset. Rashad is every bit her equal in a role that involves a lot of listening (the true sign of an actor is when they're just listening to another character but you still find them fascinating and know exactly what they're thinking at any moment). Williams has great stage presence and nails this broader take on Jessie Mae with ease. However, she was still struggling with some of her lines on the performance I caught. I was admittedly braced for Gooding Jr. to be a disappointment in his professional stage debut. Theater ain't easy. But he acquitted himself nicely; he didn't wow anyone but found his footing and delivered a modest, self-effacing performance. It would be good to see him at the end of the run and find out if he continues to improve with experience; I wouldn't be surprised a bit if he did. Wopat brings dignity to his small role as the sheriff and the terrific Arthur French delivers as always as Roy.

The biggest flaw in the show is the set design by Jeff Cowie. The crowded apartment at the beginning works fine -- with no wall between the living room and the bedroom, the idea of no privacy and everyone living on top of each other comes across fine. The bus station looks great and when we finally get to Bountiful, it has a detailed backdrop of trees and sky that is one of the most beautiful I've ever seen in a show. (Kudos as well to the lighting by Rui Rita.) However, that final set sadly lacked some dirt, some earth to ground Carrie in. And the real problem is the scene on the bus. It's given a mawkish, Hallmark greeting card look with the interior of a bus surrounded by twinkling stars. That's exactly the sort of heavy-handed obviousness that Foote doesn't need.

You won't brush away the tears at the end of the show as you might on a more nuanced production. But you will smile. And you'll definitely be glad to see Tyson back onstage and performing with all the star power she's enjoyed throughout her career. What kept her away so long? Like Carrie, if she wants to return soon to Broadway, it's hard to imagine anything standing in Tyson's way.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloff *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2

The Last Smoker In America **

Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***

Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC)* 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***
Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnacula: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2

The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's *available* for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his *website* and his *daily blog*. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also *available* for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and *gain* access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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