



**'TRIP' YOU MUST TAKE: (l to r) Vanessa Williams, Cicely Tyson & Cuba Gooding Jr. in *The Trip to Bountiful*. Photo: Joan Marcus**



## *Theater Review*

# *The Trip to Bountiful* brimming with talent

### **THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL**

Written by Horton Foote

Directed by Michael Wilson

Stephen Sondheim Theatre

124 West 43rd Street

(212-239-6200), [www.TheTripToBountifulBroadway.com](http://www.TheTripToBountifulBroadway.com)

By David NouNou

Like the finest of aged wine, *The Trip to Bountiful* has to be sipped and savored. You cannot gulp it; you have to sit back and enjoy the full bouquet and aroma of it. Written in 1953, the same year as William Inge's Pulitzer-winning play *Picnic*, which was produced earlier this season (and has turned rancid like vinegar with age), *Bountiful* has just mellowed to perfection. This is thanks, in large part, to Michael Wilson's splendid direction, as he has infused it with such a robust flavor.

The story is really quite simple; an old lady wants to go back to the home of her youth, that's all. Carrie Watts (Cicely Tyson) situation living with her son Ludie Watts (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and daughter-in-law Jesse Mae (Vanessa Williams) in a small, two-bedroom apartment in Houston has become intolerable. She yearns to go back to her family hometown of her youth in the desolate and now-vanished hamlet of Bountiful one last time to find her dignity and purpose in life before she dies. It is not what happens here but why and when. The play is so ethereal and textured in its writing that it could only come from the late Horton Foote. For no one evoked time and a memory of one's past like he could, even if the setting is a ramshackle swamp of a place.

Cicely Tyson, last seen on Broadway in 1983 in the ill-fated *The Corn Is Green*, is simply incandescent here. She is heartbreakingly real as the old lady just wanting to get out of the city and the environment she is in, smell the salt air off the Gulf Coast, and feel the soil through her

fingers one more time. Ms. Tyson gets younger and revitalized before our eyes the closer she gets to *Bountiful*. She is a thing of beauty to behold.

Besides Ms. Tyson, there is another treat here: the lovely and talented Condola Rashad. Playing Thelma, Carrie's fellow bus traveler, she is absolutely superb. She is genuine and sincere; not a false note in her performance. She was a standout and a Tony nominee in 2012 in the tepid *Stick Fly* she is enchanting in *Bountiful*. I can't wait to see her in the fall as Juliet in a revival of *Romeo and Juliet* opposite Orlando Bloom. Her development as a dramatic actress is most satisfying to watch.

In the thankless role of Ludie, the son who has not been able to properly provide for his mother or wife, Cuba Gooding Jr. gives a creditable performance. He comes across more as the hen-pecked husband and son rather the defeated man. Vanessa Williams is astoundingly beautiful and so much of an iconic diva that it is hard to see her, at times, as the shrewish Jessie Mae, but she does have some great moments, and stays true to the show's character by being forceful, controlling and overbearing in all the right places.

Simple and lingering is the best way to describe *The Trip to Bountiful*. It's a journey that everyone dreams of making once they reach a certain age. Under stress and pressure, we each have our own *Bountiful* to which we would like to escape and return to, if for no other reason but to recall simpler and gentler times.

***Edited by Scott Harrah***

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