

Montana Repertory Theatre presents classic 'The Trip to Bountiful' for AAA

By GARY STALLARD, The Lufkin Daily News Wednesday, March 08, 2006

East Texas arts patrons experienced the power of the stage Monday night as the Angelina Arts Alliance presented Horton Foote's classic "The Trip to Bountiful" as performed by the Montana Repertory Theatre.

The three-act drama, a tale of a woman's desperate attempt to return home – and her meddling daughter's attempts to prevent her "escapes" – includes Suzy Hunt as Carrie Watts, the elderly mother of Ludie (Barrett O'Brien) and mother-in-law to Jessie Mae (Heather Benton).

If audience reaction is any testament to a performance, the Montana Rep's cast left knowing they'd hit their mark, evoking laughter, tears and spontaneous applause from those in attendance.

The settings, from the tiny, two-room apartment in Houston to the old house in Bountiful, are simple, unelaborate; during the bus ride scene, there are only the two bus seats and the actors. The setting itself does not paint the picture for the audience; rather, it serves as the frame in which the actors create the portrait.

And what a portrait it is.

Foote's script shows his knack for finding comedy in human desperation: Carrie's fraught-filled attempt to hide her pension check and plan her escape induces laughter, as does Jessie Mae's nonsensical reasoning for leaving the apartment ("I've got to go to the drug store" or "I've got to have a Coke") followed by requests for things the audience knows are merely reasons to leave. There's irony in that Jessie Mae exhibits the same desperation as Carrie in wanting to get out of Houston: Carrie, longing to return somewhere she's already been, and Jessie Mae, her mind fueled by the glamour magazines she so loves to read, yearning to leave for somewhere she'll never go.

And no matter how domineering the young woman may be toward the older one, there's still that audible trace of hopelessness in Benton's voice that reminds the audience that the girl is human.

Caught in the middle is Ludie, portrayed by O'Brien with a wistful passivity. Ludie wants peace, but he won't get it with the manipulative Jessie Mae; nor will he find peace knowing that his mother will run every time the opportunity arises. He exudes defeat in his very posture: shoulders slumped, face drawn in a perpetual droop that defines his misery.

Still, as fine as those performances are, it is Hunt's Carrie that wrings the audience dry of emotion. Her obvious hopelessness and frustration – she's chastised repeatedly by Jessie Mae for such things as singing hymns and running in the apartment – displayed in the apartment scene leads to the comedy of her escape attempts; her sweetness, offered to the stranger, Thelma, at the bus station – and her query, “I guess the good Lord is just with me today. I wonder why the Lord isn't with us every day. It would be so nice if he was” – leads straight into her terror when she learns that Ludie is on his way to take her back home.

All this serves to develop one of the most powerful acting displays one will find on either the big screen or stage: Hunt's performance during the scene at the bus station, where Carrie begs the sheriff to let her travel “these last 12 miles,” is magnetic in its intensity as Hunt drags the entire audience to the very edges of seats. So strong is her pleading that the actors draw gasps and impulsive applause as the audience realizes the kindly sheriff is escorting Carrie through a rickety gate and into the final scene: Her home, her land, her Bountiful.

Closing the play, Carrie consoles the torn Ludie by telling him, “It's all right. I've had my trip.”

And the audience realizes that they've had theirs as well.

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