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Contributing writer

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Williams fest guest Cherry Jones reflects on career

Award-winning actress Cherry Jones is making her first visit to Provincetown in three decades as guest of honor Saturday night for the 10th anniversary Tennessee Williams Festival Gala at Provincetown Town Hall.

"I'm revisiting my gay youth," says Cherry Jones, with a laugh, contemplating her first visit to Provincetown in three decades.

The award-winning actress will be there this weekend as guest of honor Saturday night for the 10th anniversary Tennessee Williams Festival Gala at Provincetown Town Hall.

Jones played Amanda Wingfield in the 2014 Broadway revival of Williams' "The Glass Menagerie," and won a Tony Award as Sister Aloysius in 2005's "Doubt." TV watchers know her for "Awake" and as President Taylor in "24"; films include "Signs" "Oceans 12," "The Perfect Storm" and "Erin Brockovich."

So why so long between Provincetown visits?

"Well," she says in a phone interview, "in the first place, I've been so lucky to be on stage, so I was always in a dark theater all summer long most of my adult life. So just to have three days in a row somewhere is just like a four-star, nine-week grand tour. I feel so free. How thrilling it is to get to Provincetown knowing a little bit about its history and hoping to learn even more this trip. I'm excited. The air is thick there and I want to come breathe it."

Jones, 58, is a five-time Tony nominee and two-time winner (also "The Heiress"). She learned her craft in Cambridge, at the American Repertory Theatre, where she became part of the company at 23 and was there from 1980 to 1990. "The Glass Menagerie" also premiered there before going to Broadway.

"Cherry came to the A.R.T/ the very first season, after we had moved the company from the Yale Repertory Theatre," recalls founding artistic director Robert Brustein. "We were opening with Alvin Epstein's memorable production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' and Meryl Streep, who had played Helena for us in New Haven, was no longer available.

"We auditioned this lovely young actress from Tennessee named Cherry Jones, and it was immediately clear that we had our ingénue. Cherry was not only fresh and beautiful, but extremely intelligent, with a natural feel for character. She (became) our beloved leading lady.

"Many actors have beauty and intelligence," Brustein continues. "What Cherry had in addition was a transformative gift, the capacity to enter the soul of another character instead of just investigating your own. That is why she was never trapped, as she grew older, as being over the hill. She remained able to climb hills and mountains with rare agility."

The Cape Cod Times spoke with Jones recently, as she was taking a weekend break on Fire Island – another spot she hadn't been to in 30 years.

Q: I know that, at the gala, organizers will reveal the Tennessee Williams plays they will be performing at the Sept. 24-27 festival,. But what will you be doing Saturday?

A: Honestly, I don't really know. It's funny because last year Zach (Quinto, "Glass Menagerie" co-star) was doing what I'm doing this year. Which I think is to be interviewed and have a lovely dinner with the board members from the festival. Beyond that ... When I heard Zach was going last year to this mystical place I haven't been in 30 years, I was so jealous: "What do you mean you're going to the Tennessee Williams festival, young man?! ... I'm Amanda! I said, "How many Tennessee Williams plays have you done?"

Q: How many have you done, Cherry?

A: Well, actually, only two. I also did "The Night of the Iguana."



Award-winning stage and screen actress Cherry Jones will be guest of honor Saturday night at the gala fundraiser for the 10th anniversary of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival. ZACHARY MAXWELL STERTZ

Q: So, you've doubled his output ...

A: Exactly. I double him in age. I double him in my Tennessee Williams.

Q: How about doing the Tennessee (festival) Q & A in Amanda's character? Have you thought of that?

A: I have not. I would really have to get into the flow again. Unless you're an impersonator, you can't just slip into that. I would love to be able to do that. That would be fun. Perhaps I can come up with a paragraph.

Q: But of course you'd have to match Tennessee's writing, which is no easy task.

A: Right. I once said Tennessee Williams is like a big bouquet with a lot of extra baby's breath in it. Once you make peace with all the baby's breath and embrace it, you're home free.

Q: Did you like Amanda initially?

A: I had auditioned for (Amanda's daughter) Laura several times and I never got it. I just increasingly disliked the play, maybe in part because I never got (the part). I never was given the part to understand the play better. It always depressed me. I appreciated that it was poetic, but I didn't get it. It was (director) John Tiffany who finally just dragged me into doing a reading of it and that's when I actually got to speak Amanda out loud and I realized not only did I know her, but I understood her and immediately had such sympathy and such admiration for her. As an actor, the first thing you do is start asking the hard questions: How did she keep those children alive after that man left her in St. Louis? And she has one child who is a dreamer and the other child who is mentally and emotionally challenged. I was trying to come up with in my imagination, what would a woman in her position do? Then get them to the point where they're growing up during the Depression years. And the clock is ticking. Laura has either got to find a profession or she's got to get married because Amanda won't be there forever and Amanda knows (her son) Tom is out the door.

Q: I'm guessing the most fun and the best challenge is to play a character who is very emotionally complex. How do you sink your teeth into that?

A: You just have to take one page at a time and what you're told about the character by the other characters and what the character reveals themselves. And the whole story, I have to know whether her story is even true and if it is true, why did 17 gentlemen callers come to that house? You have to start making all of that specific and when you start to do that, then everything else starts to unlock. I realized 17 young men don't like to come anywhere where there's a daddy – a big daddy overseeing it all. So I decided that Amanda's father was a drunk and left Amanda and her mother and they had to move in with two old great aunts who had a tiny bit of money left over from before the war. Amanda was fun and unique and eccentric and the boys got a big kick out of her and they would come over to the old aunts' house on a Sunday afternoon and the sherry would come out. Half of the 17 gentlemen callers were gay. They knew where the party was and where the boys were. It's complex. And when you get into that, the rest of it starts to come together. Miraculously, things start to open up. Amanda is not just this iconic figure. She's flesh and blood and there's a story behind everything that is so much more interesting than even what Tennessee is able to reveal in a two-hour play.

Q: I just heard you've been cast in the miniseries adaptation of Stephen King's time travel/JFK assassination novel "11/23/63." Who do you play?

A: Lee Harvey Oswald's mother. (I go) from one interesting mother to another! She was a complete narcissist so it was absolutely fascinating.

Q: It's a doorstep of a book, but you can't put it down. Have you read it?

A: No, I have not and I'm not even sure I will. I don't think I will because the screenwriter will have to play fast and loose with the plot. I'd rather just sort of see the world that we create. I think they're just about ready to start shooting. I don't go to work on it until July. And they'll shoot well into September. I don't know when it's meant to air, but it's airing on Hulu.

Q: Where will you see you next?

A: I have a little role in this really interesting six-night PBS dramatic series, "Mercy Street," that they're doing that will air after "Downton Abbey" this winter. It's being produced by Ridley Scott. It's set during the Civil War and takes place in and around a Union hospital in Alexandria. It's about doctors and nurses, the Confederates who are living in this occupied town, the contraband slaves who are coming into Alexandria by the hundreds. It's fertile territory. I play Dorothea Dix, who was supervisor of the Union army nurses. She is a great American heroine. She was born in 1802 – already in her 60s by the time the Civil War began – and through much of her adult life, she campaigned for the rights of the insane and the mentally ill because they were treated worse than animals.

Q: When are you next on stage?

A: A play has just been commissioned that I'm involved with. I probably shouldn't talk about it, but I'm excited. I've been spending time with young playwrights. Just to be around that young creative energy has been very exciting. I'm dying to get back on stage. Whether any of these young people tuck me away in their fertile brains or not, it's just good for me to be around that energy. With "The Glass Menagerie," I became addicted to being with young people - Celia (Keenan-Bolger), and Zach and Brian (J. Smith) and I have gotten so close and remain quite close. I need my fix. (laughs)

Q: The A.R.T. is where I first saw you. How do you look back on those days?

A: They were the golden years. I've been fortunate to have a career that has astounded no one more than me. The A.R.T. is the reason for everything that came after it. I'm just a slow person and I auditioned horribly. To have that something at 23 and to never have to think about auditioning again ... it's like being in a creative army: You just did what you were asked to do next. In those days, in a rep company, anything was possible and we had such remarkable directors. We were such a well-oiled (machine) and we were such a joyful bunch of people. We all knew it didn't get any better.

Q: You've done TV, film and theater. Is theater your first choice?

A: It's always the first choice. I'm a farm animal. I like going to the barn at the same time every night, getting fed at the same hour, going out to the field at the same time. I like the routine of it. You hit the stage and every night you get to refine it and refine and refine it.

Q: You played Sister Aloysius in "Doubt" how many times?

A: 703 times.

Q: Wow. When I saw you, you were fabulous. But did it ever get boring and rote for you?

A: Never. Maybe it's because of my little brain, but when I get out on stage I really don't know what comes next. Every night I go out like a blank slate. I'm not kidding. It's a wonderful thing when you can just really not know what's coming next. You're as surprised as the audience is. You're never going to get where you want to with a part ever ever ever ever. So, it's always this quest that can never get boring because maybe tonight's the night. "Doubt" was such a powder keg on stage, intense, mean and lean.

Q: You did an interview with Alex Wichtel of the New York Times in 2013 and told this story about visiting friends in Maine, and meeting people who couldn't believe you were an actor.

A: They were delightful people and they asked me what I did. I think sometimes people recognize me, but they think they know me from their lives. I think that happens to people who have a small amount of celebrity from the screen. You're not famous enough that they know you from this that or the other. Every once in a while I put people out of their misery as they're trying to guess how they know me. I'll say "I'm an actor" and most of the time they'll say, "Oh really, what have I seen you in?" But these folks, they said, "No, that's not it, I know you." I love that. It makes me feel that you're this amorphous thing, that you change shapes.

If you go

Who: Cherry Jones, guest of honor
What: Tenth Anniversary Tennessee Williams Theater Festival Gala
Where: Provincetown Town Hall, 24 Commercial St.,
When: Saturday: 6:30 p.m. for cocktails, 7:30 p.m. for dinner and gala.
Tickets: \$150 per person; \$1,000 for table of eight
Reservations and information: 866-789-8336, www.twptown.org

<http://www.capecodtimes.com/article/20150528/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/150529499>

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