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May 06, 2015 11:30AM

Cherry Jones guest of honor at Provincetown Tennessee Williams theater fest gala

The story of two-time Tony Award-winning actor Cherry Jones' journey that took her from Paris, Tennessee, to Carnegie Mellon's prestigious drama school to Broadway is a textbook example of what it takes to become one of America's finest actors.

Jones is sharing highlights of that story at the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival's annual fundraising gala dinner on Saturday, May 30, at Provincetown Town Hall.

"Cherry Jones is a Tennessee Williams virtuoso," says David Kaplan, festival curator, who is interviewing Jones on-stage at the gala. "She's broken hearts and opened minds with her performances of Hanna Jelkes in the 1994 'Night of the Iguana' at the Roundabout [Theatre in New York City] and almost 30 years later, her Amanda in the 2013 'Glass Menagerie' on Broadway."

In addition to her two Tonys ("Doubt" and "The Heiress"), Jones has picked up three Drama Desk Awards ("The Heiress," "Prides Crossing," "The Faith Healer"), a GLAD Media Award, Outer Critics Circle Award ("The Glass Menagerie") and a Primetime Emmy Award ("24").

"I remember the first time I was on stage," she begins. "It was a dance recital. I had no talent as a dancer. Fortunately I didn't know that at the time. I remember standing on that stage and people laughing and clapping. Just that first moment having lights in my eyes and not being able to see them out there and just loving it," says Jones."

Thelma Cherry, her grandmother, lived with her family and encouraged her to become an actress. "We were deepest pals and thick as thieves," Jones says. "She died when I was a senior in high school so she never got to see me act. She was at home in bed and the last thing I hear her say was over and over in a coma, 'act, act, act.'"

Jones was 17 when she got to Carnegie Mellon. "I was this chubby young lesbian and everyone who didn't know me thought I was a techie," she says. They changed their minds when they saw her play a fat lady in Jason Miller's, "The Circus Lady."

Jones recalls composer, friend and fellow student Rickie Ian Gordon saying, "How nice of them to let that little techie to play that part. She's pretty good for a techie."

The drama department at Carnegie Mellon was in disarray at the time, says Jones. "Each year there was a new head of the acting department. They would march in a new group of teachers and tell us whatever we learned in the previous regime we should forget because [the new teachers] were the ones with the answers. We were taught a lot of different styles."

Jones was most inspired by Jewel Walker, her movement teacher who managed to stay on the faculty for three years. "He gave me the power of the completed gesture — that onstage you don't do anything halfway even for the simplest movement," she says.

Walker's training became important to Jones when creating the part of Catherine Sloper in the 1995 Broadway revival of "The Heiress."

"I found that when I was doing 'The Heiress,' I had so little in that part to show my inner turmoil. I really started to appreciate what he had taught us."

In the play, she had to walk up and down a long flight of stairs some 15 times. "I thought if you don't move quickly, we're going to be here all night. I told myself, [her character] Catherine, having never had a mother, would watch all the beautiful women at parties who came into her home, the grace that they had coming down the stairs. She would practice that over and over again. It's the one thing she did really well," said Jones.

In creating her characters, Jones says, "I build the house, the habitat of my character. But at the same time I'm always aware of what's going on inside. As I was reading 'The Heiress,' I could feel the way she was breathing. She was like this little bird in your hand that was about to be crushed with a beating heart. When



Cherry Jones Photo Zachary Maxwell Stertz

you can feel someone's heartbeat and how he or she is breathing, you already have a huge leg up.”

However, the creating of her characters doesn't stop when the play opens. Before she goes onstage every night, she brings her character to life. “Each single role needs something incredibly different and with Amanda [from “The Glass Menagerie”] I had the most moving preparation I ever had in my life,” she says.

She was pre-set behind a screen before the play opened. In the darkness she would gaze up at this big concrete slab to the right of the proscenium arch. “Tennessee [Williams] would be up there staring at me and sometimes he had a cigarette, usually he had a drink,” she says.

“In the darkness people would come to me. Most often it was my grandmother. One night it was Julie Harris as Frankie in ‘Member of the Wedding.’ The people I loved would appear up there with Tennessee. So that by the time I came round that screen I was filled with so much love from those that are dearest to me who I've lost. It gave me the most beautiful emotional springboard to dive into that play. And right before I came round that screen I had my mother's hand in my right hand and my daddy's in my left.”

“Ultimately, for me, all great theater makes us feel less alone. Those are the characters I respond to the most,” she says. “Characters who make us feel comfortable that we're not alone.”

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival takes place this year Sept. 24-27. For details, go to twptown.org.

Just the facts

What: Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival Gala
Where: Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St.
When: 6:30 p.m. Saturday, May 30
Tickets: twptown.org

<http://wellfleet.wickedlocal.com/article/20150506/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/150507740>

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