

About This Volume

Robert W. Haynes

After Horton Foote's death in 2009, he was honored not only by memorial services but also by an increase in the number of performances of his plays across the United States. As a man of the theater, he would certainly have appreciated that kind of tribute, and with Cicely Tyson's 2013 Tony for her role in *The Trip to Bountiful* and the 2015 Emmy for Outstanding Television Movie that went to *Bessie*, a film based on a Foote screenplay, it is clear that his contributions to drama and cinematic art are going strong. In this book, thirteen essays by eleven Foote scholars discuss a variety of aspects of the plays and films we have inherited from this American master, with commentary on works ranging from his first one-act play, staged in 1940, to the amazing nine-hour sequence *The Orphans' Home Cycle*, which he was still working on at the time of his death.

Authors whose works are assembled here range from seasoned senior scholars to graduate students, and they work in places ranging from Connecticut to Colorado to China, with, of course, a few of Foote's fellow Texans making their voices heard. Some of these contributors know Foote only through his work, and others were his close friends, but all share a deep respect for an author who maintained both artistry and integrity during a long and challenging journey through his country's theatrical life. No doubt many of the writers here would disagree over certain points of literary judgment and even over the merits of Horton Foote's numerous plays, teleplays, screenplays, and other works, yet here the reader will find critical differences set forth for what they are worth, with each writer's main objective being to add to the reader's knowledge. That, we believe, is the kind of critical attitude appropriate for a work about Horton Foote.

One writer here notes that Foote was forty-six, halfway through his life, when the film of *To Kill a Mockingbird* put his screenplay

before an audience of millions. In 1962, the battle for civil rights was still raging, and it was actually late in Foote's life that open opposition to racial equality faded from view. With this in mind, readers of Rebecca Briley's chapter here will benefit from her energetic study of this author's treatment of race and prejudice in his works. Jan Whitt's perceptive assessment of the alterations Foote made in adapting Harper Lee's novel for the film version of *Mockingbird* also touch on this issue, and she goes on to muse on what it means to adapt a work from one genre to another.

Robert Donahoo takes on a theoretical appraisal of aspects of one of this country's most underestimated plays, Foote's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Young Man from Atlanta*, a work that, even more than *The Actor*, constitutes a major retrospective on *The Orphans' Home Cycle*. Robert W. Haynes also discusses this play as he considers the role of memory and memorials in Foote's drama. He has another essay here on Foote's films, in which he argues that Foote saw, even among his fellow Texans, the hope of a kind of sanity that, when it can be achieved, offers an escape from desperation.

Two different kinds of comparative studies are included here. Xueying Wang juxtaposes Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful* with a short story by the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun, pointing out similarities in the protagonists' desire to recover spiritual peace and radical differences in their relative capacities to do so. Roy J. Gonzáles, Jr., analyzes Foote's early play *The Chase* and examines ways the writer altered the fictional circumstances as he converted the dramatic story into a novel.

In his essay, Terry Barr explores Foote's role as southern writer, relating his artistry to that practiced by authors who, unlike Foote, are actually discussed at conferences on southern literature. Barr, no mean creative writer himself, wrote the first doctoral dissertation ever on Horton Foote. Crystal Brian, whose hefty doctoral dissertation on Foote contains many jewels of insight, presents a fascinating impressionistic collage of observations and experiences supported by her conviction that this playwright is a mystic of the theater.

Gerald C. Wood, whose works on Horton Foote are essential to any study of the man from Wharton, has two essays here. One

is an assessment of Foote's critical reputation, a survey of criticism from the 1980s (when Foote scholarship began) up to Marion Castleberry's invaluable literary biography of 2014. The other essay presents a detailed account of the development of the screenplay for *Tender Mercies*, the 1983 film that won Foote his second Oscar.

Gertrude Stein scholar and high modernist Elizabeth Fifer provides an engaging essay here focusing on the awareness and memory of three aging women and making a powerful case for the range of Foote's artistic vision.

In a different kind of chapter, Cynthia Franco, librarian at the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University (and author of the library's finding aid for the Horton Foote Archive), describes the materials held at SMU.

The authors of these chapters hope that their contributions will be helpful to those interested in Horton Foote and his work.

Horton Foote: A Not-So Bitter Southerner_____

Terry Barr

Finding Foote

It's getting late on Eastern Standard Time. After nine o'clock, and I've indulged in too many mugs of generic American beer. I walk into the rental that I share with my wife's family—refugees from the Islamic Republic of Iran—and my sister-in-law says,

“You had a phone call.”

She's smiling in that knowing way, and it's not the beer that keeps me from guessing correctly. For who would guess that Horton Foote had called your rental home on a Monday night, asking you to call him back even if it's ten o'clock, or eleven?

“At night? This night?” I ask.

“Yes, tonight. He said to call because you're writing a dissertation on his work.”

That is true. A few days earlier, I had called Foote's agent and left a message saying that while I understood that he must be extremely busy, if Mr. Foote had any time to spare, I would love to interview him for my doctoral thesis. I left my number. And in many ways, left my request in the part of my brain that thinks, “This likely won't happen.”

I call Mr. Foote, Horton, as he quickly urges me to refer to him, after he answers. He is so pleasant, so welcoming, but owing to nerves and the beer, I no longer remember what we say exactly, especially now, thirty years later. What I do remember is that not only does he welcome my asking questions and writing about his career, he invites me to New York for a proper interview. A few months later, my friend Jerry (who's writing a book on Horton), his son Tim, and I drive from Knoxville to New York, straight through the night. We pull off at the New Jersey Turnpike's official rest stop for a couple of hours' sleep, but by ten that morning, we are sitting in Horton Foote's Horatio Street apartment in the West Village.

I had read all of Horton's collected plays by then and had viewed both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and his PBS *American Short Story* adaptation of "The Displaced Person." I'll have more to read after our meeting because, as one of the gentlemanly benefits of getting to know Horton, he sends me unpublished manuscripts of many plays that I have and have not heard of.

"Who does this?" I wonder. Maybe many writers would have, and maybe many southerners would not have. To me, though, and I'll always believe this, the southerner and writer in Horton Foote encouraged his generous act. I was a twenty-nine-year-old PhD candidate. A nobody. He was the man who made Harper Lee's novel sing on screen. And now he had just released his own screenplay, *Tender Mercies*. Maybe all publicity is good, but in my view, Horton had very little to gain by trusting me with his work. He wasn't the kind to be flattered either.

In Foote's apartment, Jerry, more seasoned than I, asked most of the questions. But one question kept disturbing me, and I wasn't sure how to ask it. My uncertainty was bred by my fear that my question would offend. And yet as Horton answered and elaborated on everything we asked, I decided that we were all men here—excepting, that is, his wife Lillian who kept refilling our coffee cups—and no question I could ask would deflate this writer or our visit.

I looked at my notes before I spoke, getting everything right.

"Horton, at the end of your play *The Traveling Lady*, Georgette turns to Slim, the man driving her out of town, and says 'From Lovelady to Tyler, from Tyler to Harrison, from Harrison to the Valley. Margaret Rose [her daughter], we sure do get around' (qtd. in Barr 106). My question is this: was Georgette modeled after Faulkner's "Lena Grove," who at the end of *Light in August* says, 'My, my. A body does get around. Here we ain't been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it's already Tennessee'?" (qtd. in Barr 106).

In my dissertation, all I cite for a response was that Foote admitted that Faulkner's novel did have some influence on *The Traveling Lady*. I think he smiled at me when he spoke, and then

we moved on to other subjects. Even with graduate degrees nearly attached to my name, I think I was quite naïve in that moment. My thought was that Horton Foote had wholesalely “borrowed” the plot and character of Faulkner’s work for his play. In my head, I questioned the ethics of such borrowing, and, for a time anyway, Horton Foote and his work were diminished for me.

However, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow have a way of distancing all of us from naivety and from judging people too harshly. Time also affords us a perspective, one that allows us to see that artists struggling to be seen, read, and heard adapt what they can, borrow what they need, and seek themes that speak to them of their own experience, the stuff of life.

Later, I learn that Foote always admired Faulkner and had read him enthusiastically ever since the 1940s, as any southern writer who would test himself might (Castleberry 194). And, as is true with Faulkner, there are certain southern themes that Foote pays homage to, that he expands, and that he creates anew for his work. The themes he chose or harkened toward, in my view, have announced him not just as a writer, but a southern writer completely in the grain of the masters he read or was contemporary to. These themes—a focus on place, a portrait of a strong individual who defies those around him or her and pursues a dream of a social ideal—were sharpened in Foote by his adaptation of crucial southern tales. Foote never admitted this to me, but I believe that had he not adapted Faulkner’s “Tomorrow,” “Old Man,” and “Barn Burning,” O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person,” and Lee’s *Mockingbird*, Foote’s central and best films in the 1980s—especially *Tender Mercies*—would not have been as strong, would not have so subtly and richly drawn characters who embody these southern themes. These characters don’t exactly win and maybe aren’t even admired except by those who more completely know their story. Yet they are characters that, because of their dreams and shortcomings, stir us to consider the ongoing realities of our region and our continuing southern literary Renaissance.

Chronology of Horton Foote's Life_____

- 1916** Albert Horton Foote, Jr., is born in Wharton, Texas, to Albert Horton Foote, Sr., and Harriet Brooks Foote.
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- 1925** Death of Tom Brooks, Horton's grandfather.
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- 1932** Horton Foote graduates from high school at sixteen.
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- 1933** Foote departs for Pasadena, California, to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse. He sees Eva Le Gallienne in three Henrik Ibsen plays in Los Angeles.
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- 1935** Foote finishes his Pasadena second year in spring and departs for Martha's Vineyard, where he will assist with drama at the Phidelah Rice Institute of Drama. He plays the lead part in a production of Paul Green's play "The No 'Count Boy." In the autumn, he moves to New York to seek acting jobs.
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- 1936** Rosamond Pinchot introduces Foote to Tamara Daykarhanova and pays his tuition for study with the Russians.
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- 1937** Mary Hunter invites Foote and several of his friends to join the American Actors Company (AAC). He gets a non-speaking part on the Franz Werfel show *The Eternal Road*.
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- 1938** The AAC produces Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.
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- 1940** Agnes de Mille suggests that Foote try his hand at writing plays, and Foote writes a one-act. The play, "Wharton Dance," is staged by the AAC with two one-acts by Thornton Wilder, and the program is favorably reviewed by Arthur Pollock.
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Works by Horton Foote

Plays

Wharton Dance (1940)

Texas Town (1941)

Out of My House (1942)

Only the Heart (1942)

Miss Lou (1944)

Daisy Lee (1944)

Goodbye to Richmond (1944)

The Lonely (1944)

Homecoming (1944)

People in the Show (1948?)

Themes and Variations (1948?)

The Chase (1952)

The Trip to Bountiful (1953)

The Traveling Lady (1954)

The Orphans' Home Cycle (nine plays written in the mid-1970s: *Roots in a Parched Ground*, *Convicts*, *Lily Dale*, *The Widow Claire*, *Courtship*, *Valentine's Day*, *1918*, *Cousins*, *The Death of Papa*)

Night Seasons (1978)

In a Coffin in Egypt (1980)

Blind Date (1982)

The Man Who Climbed the Pecan Trees (1982)

The Old Friends (1982)

The Road to the Graveyard (1982)

The Roads to Home (three short plays, 1982)

Harrison, Texas (three short plays, 1985)

The Habitation of Dragons (1988)

Land of the Astronauts (1988)