As part of The Cleveland Playhouse’s Black History Month celebration, they welcome the first-ever production of Horton Foote’s “The Trip to Bountiful” with an African-American cast. Since its 1953 inception, “The Trip to Bountiful” has changed hands quite a few times and was even made into a film in 1985. But, in the hands of Director Timothy Douglas, it will resurface in a light in which it has never been looked at before.

By FELICIA C. HANEY

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Since its 1953 inception, "The Trip to Bountiful" has changed hands quite a few times and was even made into a film in 1985. But, in the hands of Director Timothy Douglas, it will resurface in a light in which it has never been looked at before. Just days away from the Wednesday, Feb. 9 opening night, Douglas met with MXO in three-minute intervals between takes to talk about his friendly gesture turned historic effort brought to life on stage Feb. 4-27 at the Drury Theater at the Cleveland Playhouse.

FCH: Tell me about your trip to Bountiful. How'd you get here, directing this production?

TD: I've loved the play itself for a long time. Lizan Mitchell - who's playing Carrie Watts (the play's lead character) – she's a friend and colleague of mine. We've done a lot of plays together and I was looking for something for her that was meaningful because for actresses of her age there's not that many good roles. And then, I thought of this play and how it's never been done with a Black cast before. I thought it through and it sounded like a great idea so, I got the ball rolling.

So it was your idea to do the all Black cast?

Yes, yes it was. Cleveland Playhouse wanted me to do come and do something else but I wasn't available because knew I was working on this. So, after telling them about this project they asked, "can we do it?" So, all of a sudden, we're here.

So what is it that they wanted you to do?

Uhhh, I'm not at liberty to say.

Come on! Inquiring minds want to know…

I'm pretty sure they'll do it next year, so…

OK. So how long have you been directing?

Oh, about 15 years.

Did you do any acting yourself?

I'm an actor. I don't act as much anymore. But every now and then I'll get up on stage.

What made you change roles?

I had actually given up acting. I was sick of the profession. When I was teaching at the University of Southern California I had to direct a project for the students and someone saw that and thought that I had talent and decided to develop it and… All of a sudden I had a career.

Wow, just like that?

Yeah, it kinda was. I never thought about it but, it was at a time 15 years ago when a lot of theaters around America were catching heat for not having enough people of color on staff. So, they were looking for someone like me. They saw talent that I didn't know that I had. It was a win-win.

How important is this for you to be able to bring to life this production with the first-ever African-American cast?

Oh, I don’t think about that. Really the idea was a project for Lizan and I to work on. And I’m not diminishing that, that’s just not all that I’m about. There’s a lot more press about it than I could’ve ever imagined. I didn’t set out to do the first Black production of “The Trip to Bountiful” I set out to do a show for Lizan. But, I did think it through; I didn’t just do it willy nilly. I went out to the Horton Foote estates and met with his daughter. She controls all the property rights now. And I admit I was concerned that maybe they wouldn’t see it the way I saw it but, no hesitation, she loved the idea immediately. So, having that stamp of approval just made the whole process that much easier. So it went from idea to happening, I didn’t have to sell it to anybody and that’s rare.

Cleveland is big on theater. In your years as an actor had you ever come through here?

This is my first time in Cleveland. This trip has been 25 years in the making.

Are you from California?

Brooklyn, New York.

Oh, so the weather wasn’t too much of a shock for you?

No. I used to live in Chicago and in fact I’m preparing to move back there. I’ll be taking over my own theater.

So many congratulatory wishes are in order! Tell me more…

The founding artistic director at the Remy Bumppo Theater is stepping down. I will officially be taking over in July.

So where’s the next stop for “The Trip to Bountiful”?

When this production is finished here on the 27th it will go to the Round House theater in D.C. But I leave Cleveland after opening night.

So you won’t be around to see it in all its glory?

Nope, they give me my check and put me on a plane after opening night. Then, the stage manager takes over. I always say directing plays is like raising kids. You’re there for the birth and then opening night is like sending them off to college. It’s time for them to stand on their own.

Be sure to check out the “The Trip to Bountiful” at The Cleveland Play House now through Feb. 27. Tickets prices start at $46.00 and can be purchased online at www.clevelandplayhouse.com . Please visit the site for show times.