

Magical Mystery Tour

Cherry Jones triumphs in *The Baltimore Waltz*.

by Gerard Raymond

SOMETIMES MAGIC REALLY DOES HAPPEN in the theater. At Circle Repertory Theater, three actors on a minimal set goof-off, play silly games and take a child-like fantasy tour through Europe. But by the end of the evening, Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* becomes a heart-felt response to the ever increasing devastation wrought by AIDS.

Working the magic of *The Baltimore Waltz*, along with fellow actors Richard Thompson and Joe Mantello, is Cherry Jones, who, until recently, was a well kept secret at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has been a company member at the ART since 1980, only making rare appearances in New York.

But last season that changed: Jones gained widespread attention in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* on Broadway. She received a Tony nomination for the role of a sullen convict who discovers her humanity through the magic of the theater.

In a dressing room at Circle Rep—her face ever ready to break out into a wide smile—the tall actress with a page boy haircut is unpretentious about her work. “I am not that bright,” Jones confides. “I get by in this world, but I come from this good Tennessee background where you take things at face value. I have been so desperate about this play, wondering what it is and how they could possibly think that anybody could ever do it. And now I am so in love with it, I can't stand it.”

The Baltimore Waltz is Vogel's idiosyncratic memorial to her brother Carl, who died of AIDS four years ago before the two of them could make the trip they had planned together to Europe. In the play Anna (Jones), a 30-year-old elementary school teacher, takes a tour through Europe with her brother Carl (Richard Thompson). Anna is apparently stricken with “Acquired Toilet Disease,” a fatal illness contracted from tiny tots through careless toilet habits.

Although brother and sister travel

to France, Germany, Holland, and Austria, they never seem to leave a hospital ward at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, and they only seem to meet variations of the same man—a doctor in the hospital (Joe Mantello). Only at the end of the play when Anna is confronted with Carl's corpse, does the fantasy reverse into reality.

The playwright Vogel says that

[director] Anne Bogart's production. Now it is everyone taking a free flight together. I'm really lucky on this one and I know it.”

Vogel reports that she and Bogart were in complete agreement about wanting Jones to create the role of Anna. “Cherry has an enormous range, an incredible imagination, and flexibility,” says Vogel. According to Bogart, Jones is the only actress she knows who can feel the tragedy of a situation while simultaneously playing its humor.

Jones joined the ART at age 23, after four years at Carnegie Mellon,



Gerry Goodstein

From left to right: Joe Mantello, Richard Thompson, and Cherry Jones in Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*.

many theater people were unable to visualize her play from the printed page. “This play could be deadly in other hands,” she acknowledges, “instead of floating the way it is in

where she studied drama. “The speech person hacked away at my Tennessee accent and chopped it right out of me—made me cry every day,” she recalls. “I still have trouble

"I have been so desperate about *Waltz*, wondering what it is and how anybody could ever do it." —Cherry Jones

with words like 'penguin', words you don't say often," she explains laughing. In the decade that followed, over 25 productions at the ART, Jones extended her range as an actress, especially working on the classics. "I just love the wings you get in classical theater, great wide wings!"

At the ART she worked with hot-shot directors like Liviu Ciulei, Jonathan Miller, and Andrei Serban, but she reserves special praise for Serban. "He is the ultimate theatrical showman. You feel like you have had some drug shot through your veins when

you work with him. He is so passionate and intense and funny and wicked and mean and just everything that can be so attractive when rolled into the right package. Sometimes I hate him, and yet I would go round the world to work with him again."

Her reward for "growing up" in the company was to play the leads in *Twelfth Night* (directed by Serban), *Major Barbara* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* during her last season at the ART in 1989-90. "It was a dream season for me. It was pig heaven and I felt piggy about it!"

Playwright Paula Vogel

While The Baltimore Waltz is a funny, goofy, and fanciful experience, we are always aware of the serious notes, the nightmare that is really happening underneath. The playwright talks about the reality which inspired her whimsical fantasy.

"Someone asked me recently why I wrote this play. I put my hands in front of that person's face and I said, 'These were the hands that cleaned up my brother's body fluids and put his ashes in the ground. After that, these hands went to the computer.' If that's not being able to testify from personal experience, I don't know what is.

"If we break down into these camps and question how dare a woman talk about this experience, or if this seems like a trivialization, then the Right has very much won because they are dividing and conquering us by putting us into our own little boxes: women, lesbians, gay men, straight people, men, women, African-Americans. And that is exactly what has happened in the course of this disease. We will just squabble over political correctness and we will all die.

"I think that the reason the AIDS epidemic has become a benign genocide is because we classify people with AIDS in boxes—it happens to gays, to drug users, to minorities. That is why I deliberately chose a elementary school teacher [who gets 'Acquired Toilet Disease'] in order to

break down the ghettoization in the audience. The original title of the play was 'How I Got that Disease.'

"Also, when you are so close to someone who is dying, you have such empathy that you imaginatively feel it is happening to you. I had a lot of dreams while I was taking care of my brother, and I actually experienced that sense of confusion. In a way, I think we all have to be afflicted through the imagination in order to do something about it. It is our failure of imagination and our failure of compassion that is contributing to the problem.

"Mine is a survivor's voice, obviously, it is a coming to terms for me. But this play also comes out of my rage and my frustration at hearing the news media talk about 'innocent victims of AIDS.' That is a travesty. Everyone who gets AIDS is innocent. The puritanism that makes George Bush say if you just take care of yourself and work out and use condoms then this doesn't have to happen, just infuriates me. There is a line in the play, 'If one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing during toilet training, that would be the last we hear of the space program.'

"So many people have suffered, felt loss and died from this disease that I thought it was time for us to celebrate our grief. My brother was a wonderful person and this play is a way of saying I am proud of his life, and I am proud of his death."

—G.R. □

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New York recognition came the following year with *Our Country's Good*. But Jones adds that she did not find herself deluged with scripts afterwards. "I decided that Tony awards were invented for people's parents, anyway. The fact that I knew I didn't have a chance of winning meant I just went and had fun—it was great. Then it passed, which was also great, because the week leading up to it was like I was getting married or something."

Convinced that she isn't "particularly good" at film or television, Jones doesn't actively pursue those media. "You get to a certain point in your life—I'm 35—when you know what you are capable of, what you are good at. It doesn't mean that you are not going to continue to stretch your horizons and everything, but there is a greater confidence about whatever it is you do."

And what she loves to do, what she feels she is best at, is "theatrical theater." According to Jones, she gets the best of two worlds playing this kind of altered state. "Really theatrical things can be super naturalistic at

times—you have to be really able to pull out all that Actors Studio stuff—and at the same time it takes place in a world that is so fanciful and theatrical and really dark and bleak. Also it requires a greater physicality. You have to be athletic and you have to throw yourself into it. You should see my knee right now."

Jones loves cross-dressing and has already played three female to male roles: Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Rosaura in Calderon's *Life is a Dream*. Her next assignment, the lead in Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan* (sic), is scheduled for Chicago's Goodman Theater in April; it will give her another opportunity to change gender on the stage.

Coming back to *The Baltimore Waltz*, Jones describes how well she and Bogart work together. "Anne and I have been friends for three or four years now and have worked together before [Bogart directed *Life is a Dream* at the ART]. But we have two different mindsets about the theater.

I am much more traditional but Anne seems to free me up physically in a way that allows me to get deeper within myself and into the character. She and I have had a ball working on this together, and then I met Richard and Joe. We are like a bunch of puppies, rolling around in a box together. And we just adore each other," she adds, gleefully.

Before we close the interview, Jones expresses her wonderment at the magic of *The Baltimore Waltz*, as if her talents had nothing to do with it. "It is not the greatest play ever written; it is rough-hewn and crude and the language is pedestrian—there is no lyricism. But there is something about it that is so special. I'm not a New Age-type person, but this play is like one of those Buddhist chants. You start to do it, fulfil your responsibilities as an actor, and slowly you feel the play lifting you and the audience to some other place. There is truly a heartbeat in this play that takes over. It is just such a beautiful gift of love. And how wonderful that Paula was capable of making it." □

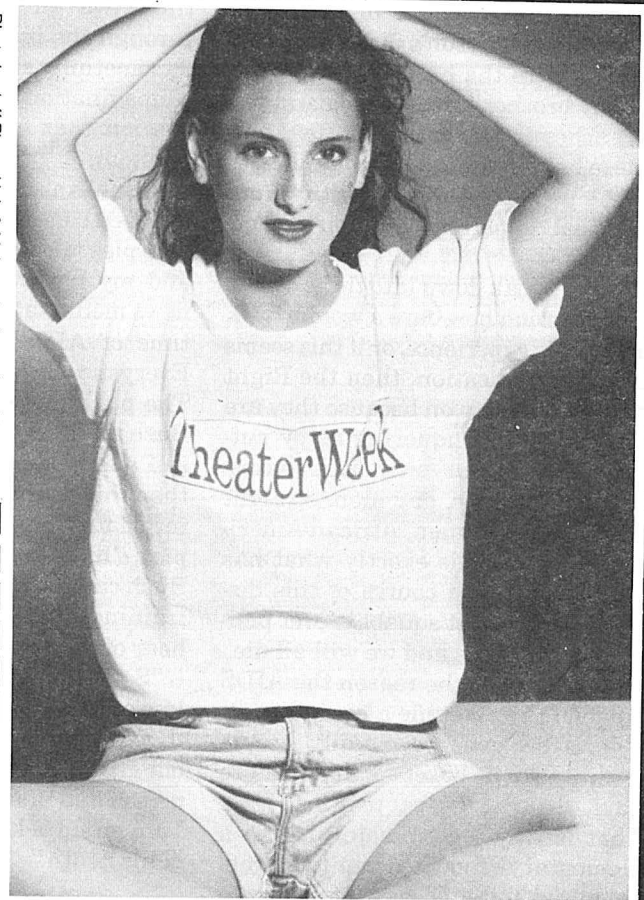
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