

Obituary: Horton Foote

Playwright, screenwriter Horton Foote dies at 92

By MICHAEL KUCHWARA, AP Drama Writer Michael Kuchwara, AP Drama Writer March 4, 2009

NEW YORK – Playwright and screenwriter Horton Foote, who movingly portrayed the broken dreams of common people in “The Trip to Bountiful,” “Tender Mercies” and his Oscar-winning screen adaptation of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” died Wednesday in Connecticut, Paul Marte, a spokesman for Hartford Stage, said. He was 92.

Foote died in his apartment in Hartford where he was preparing work on “The Orphans’ Home Cycle,” a collection of nine plays, for next fall at the nonprofit theater, Marte said.

Foote left the cotton fields of his native Wharton, Texas, as a teenager, dreaming of becoming an actor. But realizing his gifts as a storyteller, he embarked on a writing career that spanned more than half a century and earned him two Academy Awards (“To Kill a Mockingbird” and “Tender Mercies”) and a 1995 Pulitzer Prize for “The Young Man From Atlanta.”

Foote was active in the theater until the end of life. His play, “Dividing the Estate,” the comic tale of a Texas family squabbling over an inheritance, was presented on Broadway this season by Lincoln Center Theater.

The stories and lives of the people he loved in Texas became the bedrock for many of his plays, with the fictional Harrison, Texas, standing in for Wharton. Dividing his time mostly between Texas and New York, he kept the Wharton home in which he had grown up and did much of his writing there.

“I picked a difficult subject, a little lost Texas town no one’s heard of or cares about,” Foote told The New York Times in 1995. “But I’m at the mercy of what I write. The subject

matter has taken me over.”

Never one for urbane and trendy topics, Foote instead focused on ordinary people and how their nostalgic recollections would mislead them.

“My first memory was of stories about the past – a past that, according to the storytellers, was superior in every way to the life then being lived,” Foote wrote in 1988. “It didn’t take me long, however, to understand that the present was all we had, for the past was gone and nothing could be done about it.”

Parents and children are treated with an even touch. While many playwrights in the 1970s and 1980s turned to the evening news and wrote issue-oriented dramas, Foote stuck with everyday people dealing with problems of the heart: children without fathers, parents without children, career failures and redemption through love.

Through all his plays there is a search for home, something at which Foote himself winced.

“I’m often told that I’m trying to define the meaning of home – not in a sentimental way, but in a kind of a deep, primitive way, which of course is very subjective, and often I don’t think definable,” Foote once said.

Foote’s women and men are strong-willed but fallible. The elderly Mrs. Watts in “The Trip to Bountiful” flees the crowded Houston apartment she shares with her son and bossy daughter-in-law for a last look at her childhood home. Mac Sledge, the fallen country star in “Tender Mercies,” finds himself in a Vietnam War widow’s motor court after waking from a drunken slumber.

Foote was nearly 80 when he won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for his drama “The Young Man From Atlanta,” about a Houston suburban couple in the 1950s trying to understand their son’s

mysterious death.

"I'm rejoicing," Foote said from Wharton after the prize was announced. "I had no idea when I was starting out this year that something like that would happen."

The Associated Press, reviewing the 1997 Broadway production, called it "a beautiful play, a melancholy chamber piece about loss that unfolds slowly and quietly, carefully building until it finally touches the heart."

In 1997, he won an Emmy for best writing for a TV miniseries or special for the CBS movie "Old Man," based on a novella by William Faulkner.

Many viewers knew Foote best for his first film credit, the screen adaptation of "To Kill a Mockingbird," Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about childhood and racial injustice in a Depression-era Alabama town.

"I knew little about adapting or writing for the screen," Foote later wrote. But the 1962 film won Oscars for star Gregory Peck as lawyer Atticus Finch, and for art direction as well as for Foote.

"It's a wonderful adaptation," former child actress Mary Badham, who played Peck's young daughter, Scout, in the film, said in a 2005 AP interview. "Harper Lee and Horton Foote were so together on this. Horton was from the South and from that era. He knew the sights, the sounds, the smells of the whole thing and he loved the book."

In 1963, Foote adapted his own play "The Traveling Lady" to film. "Baby, the Rain Must Fall," as the film version was called, starred Steve McQueen and Lee Remick and was directed by "Mockingbird" director Robert Mulligan.

But Foote was initially soured by his Hollywood experience, especially the lack of control a writer had for the finished

product. So he returned to theater where he began adapting other writers' stories for the stage, but was wooed back to film with the emergence of small independent filmmaking in the 1970s.

Actor Robert Duvall (who had made his film debut in "Mockingbird") starred in the 1973 movie "Tomorrow," Foote's screenplay adaptation of a Faulkner story. The experience renewed Foote's faith in writing again for the movies.

"It just opened a whole new world for me," Foote told the Houston Chronicle in 1995. "I thought, if I do films, this is what I want to do."

After his mother's death in 1974, Foote began his "Orphans Home Cycle," based loosely on his parents' early lives. Independent films were made of four of the plays: "1918"; "On Valentine's Day"; "Courtship"; and "Convicts."

He began to work on "Tender Mercies" in 1979 and then began reworking "The Trip to Bountiful." Both films earned Oscars for their stars – Duvall and actress Geraldine Page.

Foote had homes in New York's Greenwich Village, New Hampshire and Wharton. "A lot of writing is thinking," he said in a 2004 AP interview. "In Wharton, people leave me alone, the phone doesn't ring. In New York, there are a lot of plays to see, and I try to see as many as I can."

Born March 14, 1916, the son of a clothing store owner, Foote first set out for California at age 17, where he spent a two-year apprenticeship at the Pasadena Playhouse. Then he was off to New York, where he ran into choreographer Agnes de Mille.

Upon hearing Foote's hometown tales, she offhandedly suggested he write down the stories.

Foote continued to act, but in 1940 took up de Mille's advice and staged his first effort, the one-act "Wharton Dance." He

returned to his parents' home to work on his first full-length play, "Texas Town," which opened the following year in New York.

Brooks Atkinson, New York Times drama critic at the time, called Foote's debut work a "feat of magic."

In the 1950s, Foote moved from the stage to the then-infant medium of television, writing weekly teleplays for NBC's "Television Playhouse." His first script for the prime-time anthology was "The Trip to Bountiful." Starring Lillian Gish, the March 1953 televised performance was later expanded into a three-act play for a two-month run on Broadway.

Foote had married Lillian Vallish, who became his producer, in 1945. She died in 1992.

Three of their four children pursued careers in acting and writing. A revival of "A Trip to Bountiful," staged in New York in 2005, featured daughter Hallie Foote as the daughter-in-law. Horton Foote Jr. also became an actor; Daisy Foote a playwright and screenwriter, and Walter Foote a lawyer.