



Jones, Cherry (b. 1956)

by Linda Rapp

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Cherry Jones became the first out lesbian to win a Tony Award when she was chosen as Best Actress in 1995. Classically trained and notably versatile, she has performed in a wide range of stage and film roles, gaining admiration for her professionalism.

Onstage, comments Nicholas Martin, the director of the Huntington Theatre Company, Jones "has a direct connection from the playwright's voice to the audience." Because she values being able to relate to the spectators, Jones particularly relishes working on stage, but she has also appeared in a number of films, including a television movie about a lesbian couple and the legal battle to retain custody of their daughter.

Jones began acting at an early age, "playing everything from Tarzan to cowboys-and-Indians to *Romeo and Juliet*" in the woods in Paris, Tennessee, the town where she was born on November 21, 1956. Her parents encouraged her interest by sending her to classes with Ruby Crider, a local drama teacher.

Seeing Colleen Dewhurst in Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* caused Jones, then sixteen, to aspire to be a professional actress herself. Her grandmother, Thelma Cherry, supported her in this ambition, and Crider helped her get into the acting program at Carnegie Mellon University.

After she graduated, Jones moved briefly to New York before joining the American Repertory Theater (ART) in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1980. Jones calls her ten years at the ART a particularly valuable apprenticeship, by the end of which she "could finally hang out [her] shingle as a mature, seasoned actor."

As a member of the ART company, Jones appeared in works by Shakespeare, Chekhov, Molière, Brecht, Shaw, García Lorca, and others. At the same time, she was gaining experience and attention through performances off-Broadway and in regional theater.

After making her Broadway debut as the Angel in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Jones had her first major Broadway role in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in 1991, for which she earned a Tony nomination. She was also nominated in 2000 for her performance in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

In 1995--after fifteen years on stage--Jones became an "overnight sensation" with a powerful lead performance in a revival of Ruth and Augustus Goetz's *The Heiress*, and she also became the first openly-lesbian actress to win a Tony award. In her acceptance speech, she thanked architect Mary O'Connor, who had been her partner since 1986.

Jones realized as a girl back in Paris, Tennessee that she was a lesbian. Although she regards her hometown with affection, calling it "a wonderful little town . . . a wonderful mix of tolerant and intolerant people," she acknowledges feeling like an outsider at times, such as when, at age twelve, she felt alienated from her church because "they could never embrace [me] because of [my] homosexuality."

Her family, however, has been supportive. Jones says that her parents have taken pride in her professional



Cherry Jones in 2009. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. Image courtesy Kristin Dos Santos. Photograph by Kristin Dos Santos or her staff.

accomplishments and that "they worshipped Mary [O'Connor] on sight."

Jones came out publicly at the very beginning of her career.

Some of her acting projects have had gay or lesbian themes. In 1992 she won an Obie Award for her performance in the off-Broadway production of lesbian playwright Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*, about a seriously ill woman whose brother--who unbeknownst to her is dying of AIDS--takes her on a fantasy trip to Europe to fulfill their long-held dream.

Jones also costarred with Brooke Shields in the television movie *What Makes a Family* (2001, directed by Maggie Greenwald), a dramatization of the story of a lesbian couple and the obstacles faced by one of the women when she must fight homophobic laws in order to adopt their daughter after her partner, the birth mother, dies.

Jones has also hosted several episodes of *In the Life*, the glbtq newsmagazine that airs on many PBS stations.

Jones has appeared in a number of films as well. She had small parts in *A League of Their Own* (directed by Penny Marshall) and *Housesitter* (directed by Frank Oz) in 1992. Her performance in Alan Wade's *The Tears of Julian Po* (1997) was described by one reviewer as "the only memorable element of the film."

Her other film credits include *The Horse Whisperer* (1998, directed by Robert Redford), *The Cradle Will Rock* (1999, directed by Tim Robbins), *Erin Brockovich* (2000, directed by Steven Soderbergh), *The Perfect Storm* (2000, directed by Wolfgang Petersen), *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002, directed by Callie Khouri), *Signs* (2002, directed by M. Night Shyamalan), *The Village* (2004, directed by M. Night Shyamalan), and *Ocean's Twelve* (2004, directed by Steven Soderbergh).

Although Jones acknowledges that film work is more lucrative, she prefers playing before live audiences instead of cameras. She won a Jason Robards Award "for artists devoted to live theater" in 2001, the inaugural year of the prize.

Jones won kudos in late 2002 for her seductive performance on Broadway as Mary McCarthy (opposite Swoosie Kurtz's Lillian Hellman) in Nora Ephron's "play with music," *Imaginary Friends*, an exploration of the famous literary feud between the two writers.

In 2004, Jones starred in the Manhattan Theatre Club's production of John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*, which moved to Broadway in 2005 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Hailed by critics as mesmerizing and powerful, Jones's intense performance as a nun suspicious that a priest might be abusing students was rewarded with her second Tony Award.

In 2008, Jones joined the cast of the Fox television series, *24*, playing the role of the President of the United States. For her work in this role, she received yet another accolade: a 2009 Emmy Award as Best Supporting Actress in a Drama.

Jones's road to stardom has not been without bumps. In the early 1990s she suffered a bout of clinical depression and drank heavily, but she has overcome these problems.

Colleagues are impressed by her presence both on stage and off. Director Robert Falls, with whom she worked in Tennessee Williams' *Night of the Iguana*, speaks of her "absolute command of the stage." Playwright Tina Howe, in whose *Pride's Crossing* Jones starred in New York, adds that "she's always adding feeling and color and light into any room she walks [Jones] is a very healthy woman and sort of shines, as if she has all these klieg lights inside her."

Quick to learn lines, eager to accept challenges, and generous in her appreciation of those with whom she works, Jones is considered a consummate professional. Andre Bishop, the artistic director of the Lincoln Center Theater, states that "[e]veryone adores Cherry because, number one, she's a first-rate person. Number two, she's a first-rate actress. And, number three, she's hardworking to a fault."

Jones has also been described as "genuinely and deeply modest." Indeed, she eschews the glamour that can come with stardom in favor of a simpler lifestyle.

After Jones received her first Tony Award, she and O'Connor celebrated her win--and coincidentally O'Connor's fortieth birthday--by driving to the home of some friends and drinking coffee in their farmyard as the sun came up.

However, in 2004, after 18 years together, Jones and O'Connor decided to break up. Jones subsequently entered into a relationship with actress Sarah Paulson.

Jones called the experience of being the first out lesbian to win a Tony "humbling," and spoke of the importance of the award to others, saying that "it means the world to all of those people in all of those places who can't be out."

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