



FOOTE

A CONVERSATION WITH HORTON FOOTE

Horton Foote left Texas in 1933 at age 17 to become an actor. He would return literally and thematically to his hometown of Wharton, 55 miles southwest of Houston, many times during his distinguished career. From his early plays, which were performed live in the beginning years of television, to his nine-play Orphans' Home Cycle, to his screenplays for film, Foote has maintained an undeniable connection to Texas. His screenplays for *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Tender Mercies* (1983) and *The Trip to Bountiful* (1985) were honored with Academy Award nominations, with the first two winning the award. His play *Young Man From Atlanta* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1995.

Horton Foote lives and works in Wharton, where he met with Terrence Doody and Nonya Grenader on August 5, 1997, for this Cite interview.

Cite: We've read that you came to writing in an interesting way. Early in your career, when you were an actor, Agnes De Mille asked if you ever thought about writing.

Foote: That's right. I was quite young and was invited by Mary Hunter to join the American Actors' Company. Members of the company came from all parts of America, and we tried to get each other familiar with our certain regions. We would do improvisations, and I was always doing something about Texas. Agnes had come to do a show with us, and she took me aside and asked, "Have you thought about writing?" When I said, "No, I never have," she said, "You should

think about it. You have interesting material, an instinct, and a sense of place."

At the time, I didn't know what she was talking about. At the time I thought, "Well, doesn't everyone write about Texas?" I just couldn't imagine that seemed peculiar. So, I thought about it and wrote a one-act play called *Wharton Dance*. I knew so little that I used real names of kids I grew up with. We put it on in our own little studio theater, and for some reason Robert Coleman, who was a critic then for the *Daily Mirror*, saw it and liked it a lot, and, of course, I was thrilled.

I was only 22 or 23, and I sent the notice and the play back to my mother. She was so excited about it that she put something in the *Wharton Spectator*. So all of my friends read the play, but they were not too happy because it wasn't all complimentary. I mean, there were girls drinking beer in the play, and they didn't do that in those days — weren't supposed to. I learned the lesson very quickly that, however you did it, you didn't use real names.

Cite: The setting for your early plays was a town called Harrison — a fictional place, but isn't it very similar to Wharton? Also, in many of these plays there is something about the Gulf, the breeze or smell of the Gulf, and other particulars of the Texas landscape.

Foote: It's interesting — I took the name Harrison because my grandfather's name was Albert Harrison Foote. There is a well-known family here named Harrison. They all think I used their name, but I

didn't. Then one day after these early plays had been on television, I got a letter from a lady who said, "I'm very confused. I live in Harrison, Texas, but we have no Gulf breezes." I didn't know until then that there was a real Harrison on the other side of Dallas. But I didn't change it; I decided to stick with it.

Cite: The 1950s were a unique time in television with shows like the "Philco-Goodyear Playhouse" and "Playhouse 90." There was a group of distinguished actors and directors.

Foote: It was an exciting time. We were pioneers in a way because television was live. There was no tape, and it was really quite close to theater, which is why I liked it a lot. There was a group from the Actors' Studio — Lee Strasberg was quite active then, and all of these young actors were coming along: Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, Julie Harris. They were just starting out, and they were burgeoning, obviously great talents. Same way with the directors: Arthur Penn, Vincent Donehue, and Delbert Mann.

Everybody was defining TV — making it up for themselves. Paddy Chayefsky and I were close friends, but we had a different vision. He wanted to do much more with the cinema — which finally won out because of the economics, not the aesthetics. When the television industry moved out to the coast, it was good-bye; then, the minute they discovered tape, it was another good-bye. With tape they could stop and cut, but you couldn't do that with teleplays — once you started you couldn't stop.

Cite: Was there anybody else in television at the time writing regional things the way you were? How did those regional themes play on national television?

Foote: Well, what happened was budgets were very small for television. And there was a man, who was really a genius, called Fred Coe. He was a producer from Alligator, Mississippi, who decided, since he liked writers a lot and couldn't afford stars, he would make the writer the star. So he featured the writers, really starred us. It was always known as a Horton Foote play or a Paddy Chayefsky play or a Gore Vidal play. So I came along, and never occurred to me to write about anything else but Texas. Fortunately he was Southerner, so he was very sympathetic. I had enormous success.

The most important play for me, the one that really upset the apple cart when television came of age, was *The Trip to Bountiful*. That was also because Lillian Gish played the role of Carrie Watts. She hadn't been seen in a while, but she had this tremendous following in America because of her film work.

I hadn't realized the impact of television. The studio was fairly small at NBC. I saw the dress rehearsal in the booth with the technicians, and then I went to see it on the set. When we came out afterward for the reception with the actors, it was an enormous success. William Paley who was at CBS, said, "Television has come of age tonight." And it was mainly because of Lillian Gish.

Then Kim Stanley had great success in a play of mine called *Young Lady of Property*. I went on and on, but finally I

just quit because I didn't feel these things were coming very spontaneously out of me and my experiences and what I thought about this place. I felt I would begin to repeat.

Cite: It must have been interesting for you to take *Trip to Bountiful* from that teleplay to a stage play.

Footnote: And then to film.

Cite: You're known for a certain kind of independence.

Footnote: That's right, I'll fight for it. I'll make much less money to keep some measure of control.

Cite: Samuel Freedman of the *New York Times* describes your work as "offering a private kind of pleasure, much like the scrubby, flat landscape of Wharton in winter; ordinary to the itinerant eye but oddly beautiful to one who lingers."

Footnote: You know, I've always thought it was beautiful around here. It never occurred to me that one wouldn't. My wife, who passed away five years ago, adored it. She thought it was beautiful, and my children think it's magical. I do like it; there's something very appealing about it.

Cite: If you had never left, how would that have affected your imagination and your sense of this place?

Footnote: I've always kept in touch. I'm really a senior citizen out here — one of the last — so I carry a great deal of the history, and people are always calling me about it. But memory can't always be trusted, you know. When I talk to the people who have lived here forever, have never left, I think their sense about the place is different from mine. They may be a little more pragmatic than I am. Most of them have a sense of loss. Part of it is sentimental, I suppose, because, as we know, nothing is going to stay the same. I don't know quite the way I rationalize it.

For instance, when I was young the street my grandparents' house was on was called Quality Hill, and the houses were just fantastic. When I think of how it is now, I have a surge of anger. But then I think, "Well, that's ridiculous. It's happened all over America." I would have been too young to do anything about it, but the people here have viewed it as a great loss. The street this house was on was called Richmond Road. When I grew up it was gravel, and it took four or five hours to get to Houston. Often it was so muddy you couldn't get there at all. But

when the highway was paved, and they took the highway to the coast, there was a big debate about whether to bypass the town. The merchants were against it, said it would kill Wharton, that people would never trade in Wharton again, and they won out. And I remember the advent of the car and when the first filling station was built on this street. I suppose they thought it was progress.

The other thing that defined the town back then was the invention of the cotton machine. I was carrying on about the cotton machine, and someone asked "Did you ever pick cotton?" I said, "Well, no." They said, "If you had gone in that field and picked cotton you would understand the cotton machines." My father had a store. I worked with him, and we would open the store from 7 in the morning to 11 at night on Saturday because that was a day of great celebration — everyone coming in from the fields. Now you go into town on Saturday, and no one is there. I've long since stopped being upset by it. I just observe and say, "This is how it is."

Cite: So much of your work is about change, about characters coming to terms with those changes.

Footnote: Yes, what else are you going to do? I still keep a place in New York, and I was walking down Hudson Street in Greenwich Village when someone asked me, "Did you know the Hudson River used to be here, and they've filled it all in?" Well, there it is.

Cite: They did it to build tenement houses. How did your family come to Wharton?

Footnote: My great-great-grandfather, Albert Clinton Horton, came from Alabama. I've never known how he got here. I think he first went to Matagorda. I don't think he came to Wharton until, well, I know the plantation was built in 1840. He was a very successful planter. He had sugar cane and cotton. I don't know how many acres he had, but a large amount of acreage. He had 120 slaves. You think of what it was like, the slavery, and you almost can't conceive of it. But there it was, and it was not that long ago.

He was first lieutenant governor of Texas, during the Mexican War. The governor went off to war, so he became governor. His portrait is in the rotunda of the Capitol as governor, which he was indeed — at least half a term.

My mother's branch of the family all came from Virginia. They came first to

East Columbia in Brazoria County. And from there my grandfather came to Wharton. The plantation was torn down in the 1950s or 1960s. My branch of the family didn't inherit it. Wharton itself is still an old town, and most of the original families still have land here. Some of their children have stayed; some are farmers, but it's all changed.

Cite: *Orphans' Home Cycle*, written in the 1970s, is a series of plays based more specifically on your family — parents, grandparents.

Footnote: Yes. I didn't know this until about ten years ago, but Shelby Foote and I realized we were kin. Our ancestors — I don't know how many greats ago — were brothers in Virginia. His branch went to South Carolina, then finally to Mississippi. Mine came down to Galveston. The story was that they had a shipping fleet out of Galveston or that they came down to buy and sell cotton, but no one is alive who remembers.

Cite: You mentioned that you know many of the old stories. I've read that you were a good listener as a child; you spoke of a strong oral tradition in the South.

Footnote: Yes, I took it all in. People seemed very real to me because of these stories. I was always fascinated by the quirks in families, why one person in a family was successful and another person wasn't. There were vivid storytellers in my family, and it was interesting to listen to them. I was never bored. I sometimes can't believe they're all gone. There are so many things I would like to ask now that I didn't think to ask them — so many things that you get different versions of, and you don't know really which is correct. How much is fantasy and how much is reality, whatever reality is, none of us really knows. It's so subjective.

I didn't live here for a while, but I've always come back to visit. About eight years ago I decided to come back, and it was a very wise decision. In a way I feel like a stranger because the Wharton that I still cherish is obviously not here. There were eight families that controlled everything. They seemed almost, well, immortal. And they're all gone.

Cite: I was recently watching the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which you adapted for the screen from Harper Lee's novel. It was such a moving book and film.

Footnote: It was interesting because Harper and I are very good friends; we share the same sensibility. I think her Monroeville

has probably changed even more than Wharton, because they weren't able to shoot the film there. They had to shoot it on the back lot at Universal.

Cite: Certain scenes in the film were not in the novel — I remember one on a porch.

Footnote: Yes, that was one I invented.

Cite: There were conversations overheard from the inside of the house to the porch and vice versa. One was with the children, in their bedroom, talking about their mother. It seems that could have happened on the porch of this house.

Footnote: Well, that's where I got it. See, that was my front bedroom, and I'd go to sleep listening to my mother and father talking on the gallery. My father called it a gallery, my mother called it a porch. I listened to them. If you remember in the novel, the mother is scarcely mentioned, you just don't know what happened to her, and that bothered me. After all these years I asked Harper about it because she never complained about the changes. But in this scene I was able to bring in the mother.

This house was built the year I was born [1916], and I was brought here as a baby. My grandfather built it as a kind of peace offering. My mother and father eloped, and my grandparents weren't speaking to them.

Cite: Did you feel you were out of place when you lived elsewhere?

Footnote: Oh, no. For so long my world was the theater, and in a way, my world is still the theater. In some ways I've made an adjustment now. I just have learned to live without the theater. First of all, it's shrinking. But that was my great passion, much more than film. I was just a theater nut. I was either teaching or directing or writing or involved in some way. And that's a very special world. I've never been able to write about the theater. I've tried a couple of times, but my instincts are not there.

Katherine Anne Porter, whom I admire a great deal, thinks — I've never proved this theory, but I have a hunch it's true — that for writers, themes are established by the time you are ten years old. It doesn't mean that you stick in that period of time, but what is going to concern you thematically is somehow mysteriously there. I think she may be right.

Cite: Are there any writers you like who you think are strong writers about their

Mrs. Watts: It's strange how much I had forgotten, Ludie. Pretty soon it'll all be gone. Five years . . . ten . . . our house . . . you . . . me.

Ludie: Yes'm.

Mrs. Watts: But the river will be here. The fields. The woods. The smell of the Gulf. That's what I took my strength from, Ludie. Not from houses. Not from people.

The Trip to Bountiful, 1953

sense of place?

Footnote: I was thinking of J. F. Powers, who writes a lot of short stories. A practicing Catholic, he writes about Catholics in a wonderful way. I think he's a great writer. Willa Cather was a great writer. Nathaniel Hawthorne was a great writer.

Cite: I've just been teaching Proust, and he is as firmly in the place of his childhood as anybody. By the time he was ten, it was all set.

Footnote: Yes, that's right. Well, look at Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* — there's a man who writes about his milieu — and *Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow about the Jewish experience. One of my favorite novels — a short novel, *Seize the Day*, by Bellow — absolutely comes out of his experience. A writer who is not read much today but at one time was very popular is James T. Farrell, who wrote about Chicago. Most writers I admire have a strong sense of place.

Cite: Did you know Gore Vidal at all?

Footnote: Yes.

Cite: I just read his autobiography last month, *Palimpsest*, and was surprised I liked it so much. I was moved by it.

Footnote: I was moved by it, too, and also very saddened by it. He's bright, oh so bright, and politically, I usually agree with him. I think he's awfully hard on Bill Clinton, whom I happen to like a lot. I haven't seen Gore in a long time, but there was a time when I did see him quite often, and he was always witty and always nice to be around.

Cite: In your recent play, *Young Man From Atlanta*, you come back to Houston.

Footnote: Houston has always been the nearby city because I was raised here. I'm sentimental about Houston, too. Those fantastic oaks. I cannot bear to go down Main Street. It's a trashy street now. Maybe it was never as beautiful as I remember it.

Cite: *Young Man From Atlanta* was not so much about change in Houston but about change thrust upon the characters, about circumstances. If people left Harrison for Houston because of opportunity, do you think these towns and cities can be as resilient as some of your characters?

Footnote: I don't think you can predict that. I don't try to do that. I try to take a situa-

tion and examine it, almost impersonally, and try not to be sentimental or subjective. I just try to know the truth as it is, of that moment. That's the only kind of truth you can count on, because the truth can fool you. Who would have thought that the morass here would die down, too? Now the filling stations are all closing and moving to another area. Who knows what will happen here with activity moving to the freeway? And who would've thought that there's not a merchant left in downtown Wharton except one, and he lives in Houston and commutes?

Cite: You've talked about how film has changed. Do you have optimism for the independent filmmaker?

Footnote: Well, it's very difficult. Increasingly difficult. I just finished a film called *Alone*, which will show at the Telluride Film Festival this September. Now, you almost have to finance through cable. We can thank Mr. Reagan for that, one of the many things he blessed us with. There was a time that there was an antitrust ordinance against the big studios owning the theaters, then he came along and changed all that. Now the studios control everything, and it's very hard for independents. It's getting to be so corporate. Well, it's the same as the publishing of books. It's all getting to be one big conglomerate, like hospitals, to make more money. And that's what's driving the engine. Not that you don't have to make a profit; you do, to stay in business. But when I made those films, particularly those that my wife and I could do together, we could do them for under \$2 million. It's very hard to do that today.

I don't know about you, but I have no desire to see any of these new films. I just don't go. It wouldn't do me any good, since we don't have a movie theater here. But I belong to the Academy so every year I'm inundated with videos. I watch as many as I can so I can vote sensibly. I have films that I watch here. I'm very fond of a Japanese filmmaker called Ozu. And I love John Huston's *The Dead*. There's a film called *Jean de Florette* that is very different in style. It isn't that I only like gentle, quiet films — *Jean de Florette* has a lot of melodrama and thrust to it. It's just the sensibility that interests me.

Cite: In addition to your current screenplay and the retrospective of your films at the Telluride Festival, are there other projects?

Footnote: I'm also writing my memoirs for Scribner — only the first 16 years. They want me to do Wharton, and I think really more about Wharton than about me.

Cite: You say you still keep an apartment in New York. Do you go there often?

Footnote: Well, during *Young Man From Atlanta*, I was there a lot. And when it was nominated for a Tony, I went for that. And I'll go back in October for a bookstore that's opening and wants to feature my books. It just depends on what happens; if I have another play done.

Cite: Are there any other places, large cities or not, that interest you?

Footnote: I'm really very provincial that way. I don't think I'm a good traveler. I'm too involved with my work, I guess. Now, when I go to London, which I don't do often, I spend all my time in the theater.

I'd like to go to Ireland, I guess, because of Yeats and people like that. A dear friend of mine was Herbert Berghoff who had a famous acting studio in New York — HB Studio. He was a Jewish refugee from Germany and, even though he spoke English fairly well, he asked me once, "Do you know what it is like to lose your language?" And I think that's partly it. I find myself very insecure — in other words, I don't have any linguistic talents. Somewhere very early on, I got intimidated. There are many people I know and admire that are passionate about learning Italian and Spanish and French, Russian, Japanese, and so on. And the nearest I've gotten is because I'm very fond of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. And so I do a lot of work on that — trying to figure out something he's talking about. For instance, I don't have any desire to go to Mexico. Something about being away from my language is very frightening to me. Well, that's very provincial, I know.

But, this is interesting, speaking of the Mexican culture. The thing I'm working on now for Universal is dramatizing Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series. I have a housekeeper who is Mexican and doesn't speak English very well. She's having great trouble getting to be a citizen because of the language barrier — even though she should be, she'd be a fine citizen. And she was in here the other day and said, "Oh, my daughter's reading those books." Her daughter is ten years old, and it's so marvelous for me to think that this child, whose mother can hardly speak English, is an avid reader.

Cite: Those are books with a strong sense of place — my memory is that every other chapter begins: "And then it got colder . . ."

Footnote: When they called me about it, I had never seen it on television. I heard it was not very good, and I didn't think I wanted to do them. But I decided to look at them, and I was very impressed. It's not Mark Twain — it's not Huck and it's not Tom — but there's something very honest about them. Don't you think so?

Cite: Absolutely. Wilder's descriptions of the landscape are beautiful.

Footnote: When they came down here, right here in this room, I said, "Look, if I do this I'm not going to sentimentalize this. I'm going to somehow find the spirit of these books." I don't know that it's possible, but I'm sure going to try. There's a great quietness about it.

Cite: Music seems to play a critical part in your plays. Is that something that you grew up with?

Footnote: Not then. Again, I don't judge, but there was no music culture here. I guess the most complicated music I heard growing up was Ethelbert Nevin. My mother played the piano, my father collected songs like "Goodnight Mr. Elephant" and "My Sweetheart's the Man on the Moon." I was fascinated, though, when I sat on the porch out there and heard music, through the cotton fields two streets over. That's where all the black barbecue joints and barbershops were, and sitting on the porch, I could hear their music. And on the other side you could hear the Baptist church, because they had the windows open, always. I'd hear the hymns over here and the blues over there.

There's a great thing in Charles Ives's music, of which I've gotten very fond and by which I lived when I was working on the *Orphans' Home Cycle*. That music has all these thematic interests. I've gotten very interested in music. Reynolds Price wrote in his introduction to one of my plays that I'm "the most musical of American playwrights." I don't know how he arrived at that, because I never formally studied music. But the structure of music interests me a lot.

Last night, for some reason, I turned on Channel 8, and they're doing a series on the history of rock 'n' roll, and I listened. I don't know what they're talking about. To me, it's a lot of noise. That amazes me, doesn't it? I had no relationship to Ives or to John Cage, and now they are my passion. This other music seems almost sentimentally sensuous. They're priding themselves on something where there's not much substance. I know that popular music has always been sentimental.

Cite: Are there poets you like besides Pound?

Footnote: I adore him. I love his early work, and he's influenced me because of his brevity and the preciseness of him. Well you can see behind you [gestures to bookshelves] the poets I like — Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Penn Warren . . .

Cite: When you were an actor. . .

Footnote: Long time ago . . .

Cite: . . . was there a philosophy during that time — a concept?

Footnote: When I first started, I was 15. I

decided I was going to be an actor, and I wasn't going to go to college. My parents thought I was too young to make that decision, so I had to wait a year. When I turned 17 they said, "Well, if you still want to go, we can't have you go to New York, you're just too young." So they sent me to Pasadena Playhouse in California, which was a well-known theater school, an outgrowth of what was then called community theater. They taught acting by acting, and the first thing they put me in was a Roman comedy. Well, I had read one Shakespeare play, and it wasn't very helpful. But I survived and got to New York, where I met a woman named Rosamond Pinchot from a famous family. She had been the nun in Max Rinehart's *The Miracle*. I told her I was looking for a job, and she said, "I'm studying with the Russians, and I need a scene partner. Would you be interested?" My Russian teacher had come to America with Michael Chekhov, and they were all disenchanted with politics. It all had an enormous impact on me. They had great scorn for American acting and the commercialism of it. It wasn't called "the method" at that time — that was Lee Strasberg. I worked with him, too, so I became a great believer in method acting. I think it's a wonderful way of training.

Cite: A more realistic way?

Footnote: They say that, but what is realism? It's just as much of a discipline as anything else. When you get right down to it, if something has integrity and meaning, I don't think the outward form means very much. I think there can be just as much sham in surrealism or expressionism or whatever. Actually, there's nothing realistic about it, but they go after a certain sense of truth.

Cite: There is a truthfulness in your dialogue.

Footnote: Yes, the thing the Russians gave me was a sense of structure. They had enormous respect for plays. Working as an actor, you would work first to find what the overall thrust of the play was about and then break it down into beats or actions or whatever you want to call that. So you began to see that there were bones, and that there was a spine, ribs, and arms, and legs, and how it was all connected. That was the search you made as an actor.

So when I came along as a writer, I instinctively began to do the same thing — looking for structure. As an actor we were taught to ask, What do you want?

Why did you come into the room? What is your purpose? So it unconsciously fed that movement towards a sense of structure. I was very grateful because, believe me, by my second play I was known as a promising playwright, and I knew nothing about playwrighting.

Cite: That must have been difficult.

Footnote: It was very hard. For about four years it was painful. So I got away from realistic plays and began to work with dancers. I worked with Martha Graham, Jerry Robbins, Agnes De Mille, and Valerie Bettis. Then I went to Washington and started a theater of my own with my wife. Most of my plays during that time could be considered highly experimental. I was trying to find a way to use dance and music and language all together.

Sam Shepard's a playwright who seems to do that in his play *The Tooth of Crime*.

Cite: Do you have other favorite playwrights? I notice John Millington Synge on the shelf there, the Irish playwright.

Footnote: I like him a lot. I do have favorites. I'm very, very close to Chekhov. Almost as much for his short stories as his plays.

When I went to Pasadena, I was practically play illiterate. I'd read a lot of novels, and quite fortunately the things I'd read have stood me in good stead. I loved Willa Cather, even as a young boy, and I loved Mark Twain, and I loved *The Forsyte Saga* by John Galsworthy.

But anyway, during my second year in Pasadena, for my birthday, my grandmother came out there. Eva Le Gallienne had just closed at the Civic Rep, and she was on tour with three Ibsen plays. I had never seen Ibsen and never read him. So my grandmother asked if I'd like to go see *Hedda*. I did, and I was transfixed and said, "I want to see all three." So she took me to all three, and that really changed my life. I thought, "That's what I want to do. I want to be a part of that kind of theater." ■



Foote House, Wharton, 1997. Photo by Nonyo Grenader

“That was my front bedroom,
and I’d go to sleep listening to my mother and father
talking on the gallery.
My father called it a gallery, my mother called it a porch.”