

# An Evening With A Broadway/Film Actress

The actress in question is two-time Tony Award winner Cherry Jones. She has the small role of a TV news executive near the end of Tina Fey's new film [\*Whiskey Tango Foxtrot\*](#). The evening our conversation took place, we were in the Catskills "metropolis" (population, c. 70) of Bovina Center in the last part of the 90s. First, however, a little background is needed before we get to Ms. Jones.

While pastoring the small Presbyterian Church in that hamlet, I reviewed films for the county newspaper and secured a grant to buy a video projector and a 12-foot foldaway screen so we could move our film group from homes into the church hall. Soon we moved from the church basement to the nearby library so as to open the Saturday night film sessions to the whole community. This meant changing the name from "God and the Movies" to "Movies That Matter." We quickly discovered that community folk, some coming from 10 to 60 miles away, far outnumbered church folk, with attendance ranging from a dozen to as many as 65. Many of these film lovers were "weekenders," NYC dwellers who liked to spend their weekends in the mountains away from the congestion of the City.

Bovina boasted a fine coffee shop/diner where one of our young adult church members worked as a part-time waiter. One night he recognized a customer as a stage and film actress—Cherry Jones, of course. During a brief after-dinner conversation with her he mentioned that his pastor hosted a film discussion group nearby. Interested, she volunteered to come and speak to the group if we were interested. We certainly were, and soon I was on the phone discussing with her what the program would be. Because I had DVDs of three of her films, we decided that we would show clips in which she appeared, and she would talk

about how they were made. The films were *Erin Brockovich*, *The Perfect Storm*, and *The Horse Whisperer*.

Cherry Jones' film career is not as well known to the movie-going public as her Broadway career is to New Yorkers, because, as she explained in her introduction, she does not want to commit to being away from Manhattan for the long periods of time that a major movie role would require. Her first love is the stage, and for that she must stay in New York. Accordingly, she has accepted small roles which do not require her leaving Manhattan for long—indeed, most of which can be filmed there.

In [Erin Brocovich](#) Ms. Jones played Pamela Duncan, one of the many victims that the paralegal Erin Brocovich interviews. The huge California utility Pacific Gas and Electric Company had secretly been dumping its toxic waste into the ground, contaminating the ground and water for a large number of people who lived near the facility. As I recall, Pamela was the suspicious victim who at first did not want to talk with Erin, but who eventually came around after she was convinced of Brocovich's sincerity.

The above film was a relatively simple shoot, just dialogue between Julie Roberts' Erin and Ms. Jones' victimized householder. *The Perfect Storm*, filmed on the opposite side of the country off the coast of New England, involved a great deal of physical work in a giant water tank, as Ms. Jones showed us, exaggerating her act of hanging on to a rope, much to our amusement. She was playing Edie Bailey, a passenger on a sailboat. Seeing the dark storm clouds approaching, her character pleads with the millionaire owner to head back to port. He stubbornly refuses, with the result that the small boat is swamped, and were it not for the US Coastguard, she would have drowned. She described how fearful and exhausting the experience was as wave after wave was sent crashing into her. Standing in front of our screen, her two hands high above her head clinging to an imaginary lifeline, she moved abruptly

to the right and the left as she mimicked

being swept back and forth by the rushing water. It was jolting enough for just one take, but the director needed shots of her being pounded by the water from several different angles for editing purposes, so she had to go through the dousing several times.

Her role as Liz Hammond in the Robert Redford-directed *The Horse Whisperer* was far less physically demanding. In fact, she didn't need to leave her New York apartment, even though the action took place many miles away in upstate New York. The script called for star Kristin Scott Thomas to talk with her on the telephone concerning her character Annie MacLean's daughter and horse, both terribly injured in an accident while out riding (indeed a companion of the girl was killed by the truck that ran into them). Liz is a veterinarian, hence the call from the anxious mother/horse owner. Annie did not want to put down the badly injured horse, even though others advised doing so. She saw that her deeply traumatized daughter would be even more disturbed if they ended the life of the animal. Normally the phone conversation would have been shot separately, the crew filming each of the women in turn while each pretended to be listening to the other during the talk. Cherry preferred to have the conversation shot in real time, so with film crews at both locations, Ms. Scott picked up her phone and put in a long distance call to Ms. Jones.

All of the above roles were brief cameos, but in the Tim Robbins-directed *Cradle Will Rock*, one of my favorite show biz films, she had a much bigger role as real life Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theater Program during the tumultuous 1930s. It involves her, Orson Welles, and other thespians staving off politicians opposed to their pro-union plays that they were staging around the country. (I will soon search this out in the March 2000 issue of VP and post it on the site.)

To learn even more about this busy actor's impressive TV credentials, type in her name at the [IMDB.com](http://IMDB.com) website. Cherry Jones is one of our least known national treasures, one who generously provided a room full of film lovers some 20 years ago with a memorable experience we will long treasure.