A Soul Adrift in Texas, Looking for a Place to Nest

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

The Traveling Lady

By Horton Foote, directed by Mason Castleberry; set by Marian Evans, lighting by Jason Jeannette, costumes by Maggie Lee-Burduff; sound by Graham Johnson; stage manager, Anne Clarke; assistant director, Daniel Hooge; producer, Peter Marsh; associate producers, Robert Akins and Marcie J. Schrieber. Presented by the Ensemble Studio Theatre, 524 West 52nd Street, Clinton, (212) 352-3141. Through March 19. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Lynn Cohen (Mrs. Mavis), Stan Denman (Sil Murray), Frank Girardot (Judge Robedaux), Margot White (Georgette Thomas), Quincy Confoy (Margaret Rose), Rochelle Oliver (Clara Breedlove), Carol Goodheart (Sil Murray), Alice McLane (Mrs. Tillman), Jamie Bennett (Henry Thomas) and Matthew Conlon (Sheriff).

Another voyaging soul set in motion by Horton Foote has reappeared on a New York stage. As Mrs. Carrie Watts, the dauntless heroine of "The Trip to Bountiful," is preparing to board her last bus, along comes Mrs. Georgette Thomas, a younger but likewise indomitable woman, seeking to put down roots in a small but affecting staging of "The Traveling Lady" at Ensemble Studio Theatre.

This new production of a revised version of Mr. Foote's 1954 play began its life way, way off Broadway, at Baylor University in Waco, Tex., as part of its first Foote festival in 2004. Although cast with professional actors, the Ensemble Studio version is produced in association with Baylor and directed by the head of the college's graduate theater program, Marion Castleberry, who is also the founder of the festival and of the Horton Foote Society.

Like "The Trip to Bountiful," which is of roughly the same vintage (it was first produced in New York in 1955), "The Traveling Lady" is a delicately drawn portrait of an anxious spirit in search of home. A spell of troubles comes to Harrison, Tex., the fictional locus of much of Mr. Foote's work, when Georgette (Margot White) and her young daughter, Margaret Rose (Quincy Confoy), descend on the welcoming front porch of Clara Breedlove (Rochelle Oliver), seeking a more permanent refuge.

Georgette is looking to set up housekeeping in a new town, and is awaiting the imminent release of her husband, Henry (Jamie Bennett), from the nearby penitentiary. What she doesn't know is that Henry has already arrived in town seeking her out. A binge drinker who had gone to jail for brawling, he had fallen off the wagon again, but is being kept on the straight and narrow by Mrs. Breedlove's neighbor, Mrs. Tillman (Alice McLane), the town's tireless reformer of lost souls. The action of the play depicts the squall that whipped up when Henry and Marga-