



## Cursed with the whip

### Diversionary stages the toughest act of Capote's life, *Tru*

By Jeff Smith, Dec. 10, 2014

Diversionary Thetare, 4545 Park Boulevard, University Heights - \$29-\$51

“When God hands you a gift,” Truman Capote writes in his preface to *Music for Chameleons*, “he also hands you a whip, and the whip is intended solely for self-flagellation.”

In 1966, Random House published Capote's experimental masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. The book was an enormous gamble. “Very few literary artists ever wrote narrative journalism.” It was “almost virgin terrain.” For his nonfiction account of the brutal slaying of the Clutter family in 1959, Capote attempted “the credibility of fact, the immediacy of film, the depth and freedom of prose, and the precision of poetry.” And “for six nerve-shattering years, I didn't know whether I had a book or not.”

He did. An American classic.

Two weeks before publication of *In Cold Blood*, Capote promised an even greater masterpiece: *Answered Prayers*. The title comes from St. Teresa of Avila: “More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones.” The book would be a multivolume, American *Remembrance of Things Past*. Capote would be P.B. Jones (a la Marcel in Proust’s novel). He would write about the superrich in ways that would take literature beyond the true to the “really true.”

Capote signed the contract in 1966. In 1969, having produced nothing, he signed a second for three books, due 1973. Capote finagled the deadline to 1974, then 1977, then 1981. In 1984, he died from drug- and alcohol-related damage. He was 59. Three years later, Random House published *Answered Prayers: The Unfinished Novel* — all 180 pages.

What happened? Capote claimed he was working on a new style: “simple, clear as a country creek.” He said that “not once in my writing life had I completely exploded all the energy and esthetic excitements that material contained. Even when it was good, I could see that I was never working with more than half, sometimes only a third, of the powers at my command.” His goal: prose that moved “faster and deeper” than anything he — or anyone else — had done before.

[Along with Thomas Pynchon’s preface to *Slow Learner*, Capote’s preface to *Music for Chameleons* is one of the most insightful you’ll find on the art of writing.]

Jay Presson Allen’s *Tru* takes place during Christmas of 1975 — in effect, the epicenter of Capote’s 18-year creative crisis. He’s alone in his posh apartment at 870 United Nations Plaza: a god’s-eye view of the East River, legendary fedoras on a hat rack, an untrimmed Christmas tree — and he has “the worst case of the Mean Reds ever.” In the first 50 minutes of the two-act play, he drinks at least five double vodkas. That’s a shot every five minutes. “’Tis the season to be jolly,” he mutters, “like it or not.”

Esquire printed two “tell-all” chapters from *Answered Prayers*: “Mojave” (not included in the final version) and “La Cote Basque.” It wasn’t hard to see that the

characters — Perla Apfeldorf, Lady Ina Coolbirth, Wallis Windsor among them — were thinly veiled portraits of the upper crème of society’s de la crème (Jackie Kennedy looks like “an artful female impersonator impersonating Mrs. Kennedy”). Almost as one, the upper crust condemned him as a traitor. “What did they expect?” Capote shot back. “I’m a writer, and I use everything. Did all those people think I was just there to entertain them?”

But just what was he to them? A cultural trinket? A trusted confidante? And what did he expect? For most he cared nothing, and said so, often. But when “Babe” and “Slim” rejected him, it almost broke his heart.

One of the difficulties of watching *Tru* at Diversionary: it unfolds like an enormous dish-fest. First names drop with such persistent alacrity the script assumes you’re in with the in-crowd. You know that “Babe” is Barbara Paley, wife of CBS-CEO William S.; that “Slim” is Lady Nancy “Slim” Keith, mega-socialite romantically linked with Hollywood stars (Cary, Clark, and Coop); that “Gloria” is the Vanderbilt, etc. Diversionary Theatre’s program has profiles of many of them. A must-read beforehand.

Anyone who knows Todd Blakesley wouldn’t recognize him as Tru. He’s shaved his beard and cut his hair (and whoever did it matched Capote’s color and encroaching baldness). He has Capote’s mannerisms — the flapping tongue, the various slouches and studied poses, the flamboyant fingers — but none to the point of caricature. He holds forth on Matt Scott’s set, UN Plaza elegant, newspaper-strewn homey, and dons Peter Herman’s costumes, a beige turtleneck, green sweater, purplish cords in act one, a kimono in two.

Blakesley has the look and effectively re-creates the moment: Capote is confused, bitter, afraid he’s lost not only his few closest friends but his ability to write. The inner conflict is with his way of life. He must reform. Quit drinking and downing sedatives to sleep — or, at least fall asleep; he was a wide-eyed insomniac — and snorting coke. Blakesley paints a sharp portrait of an addict on the edge. Capote still can choose. Two years later, that option was gone.

Blakesley's at his best when the script falters. Act two builds to revelations about Capote's childhood. But these come in the form of lengthy tales taken from his own words. In effect, they're narrative-backstory when the drama should be center stage. Blakesley layers in subtexts, shores up the scene, and shows that Capote was a great writer cursed with "the whip God gave me."

---

***Tru*, by Jay Presson Allen**

**Directed by Derek Charles Livingston;** cast: Todd Blakesley; voices of Jacque Wilke, Sylvia C. Thompson, Hanna Logan, Cara Vacek Hanhurst; scenic design, Matt Scott; costumes, Peter Herman; lighting, Luke Olson; composer/sound designer, Kevin Anthenil

*Playing through December 21; Thursday through Saturday at 8:00 p.m. Sunday at 2:00 p.m. [diversionary.org](http://diversionary.org)*