

'Lu Ann' still a charmer

THEATER REVIEW: Humor, breadth stand out in Contemporary's show

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By **LAWSON TAITTE** / Theater Critic

The third act was always the best thing about *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*. At Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, it still is.



Darnell Renee / Special to DMN

***Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* runs through May 6 at the Contemporary Theatre of Dallas. ++**

Preston Jones wrote the script as the second installment of his Bradleyville Trilogy for the Dallas Theater Center in 1973. As *The Texas Trilogy*, the three plays made the Dallas playwright (who died only six years later) the hottest thing in American regional theater and even went on to Broadway.

Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander was unique in that Colonel J.T. Kinkaid, the hilarious octogenarian who dominated the other two plays, is only mentioned briefly. It also spaces out its three acts over 20 years. When was the last time you saw a drama with two intermissions, in this era when many new plays don't even have

one? This novelistic breadth shows us the social changes in a small West Texas town between 1953 and 1973 through the eyes of its leading character, born Lu Ann Hampton.

The title role actually requires two actresses. In the opening act, the young Lu Ann (Catherine DuBord in the Contemporary Theatre of Dallas production reviewed Saturday) tells her mom (Morgana Shaw) all about her cheerleading duties at the high school, and she spends a lot of energy nagging her boyfriend Billy Bob (Beau Trujillo) about getting his dad's snazzy new car to take her to the class picnic. Brother Skip Hampton (Ashley Wood) brings home his buddy from the Korean War, Dale Laverty (Kevin Moore). Lu Ann and Dale hit it off – and so Lu Ann adds her second surname.

Now played by Sue Loncar, Lu Ann meets her second husband, Corky Oberlander (John Venable) in a bar during the second act. The real fun here, though, is the broad West Texas humor that was Mr. Jones' specialty. As Red, the bar owner, Kevin Grammer even looks and talks like the late playwright. Nye Cooper, J. Rod Pannek and Harry Reinwald give us the roughhouse joshing and salty dialogue that permeate the trilogy's other two comedies. Director Rene Moreno has judged the play's style correctly by letting his performers play broadly here, giving the cussing and fussing all they've got.

Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander comes alive in the third act. The characters from the first have changed enormously, thus giving the actors a chance to really show their stuff. Mr. Wood perhaps overdoes the bumptiousness of the young Skip, but his broken, shell-shocked vet 20 years later is masterly in its childish sadness and transparent guile. Mr. Trujillo, all

puppy clumsiness and puppy love before, has become quite different. And Ms. DuBord, now playing Lu Ann's teenage daughter, gives us a contrasting portrait of adolescence.

It's Ms. Loncar, though, who has come the farthest – even though she didn't appear until the second act. There she never quite relaxed and settled in. In the more reflective third, she's perfect in her reunion with her long-lost sweetheart and her interactions with her family. The playwright doesn't really let us know how we're supposed to feel about his heroine in the earlier scenes. By the end, Ms. Loncar demonstrates that she deserves our respect and our affection.

- Through May 6 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears St. Runs 135 min. \$27, discounts. 214-828-0094; www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com.