

Dallas Observer

Laughing Mater

Mommies dearest and queerest in new shows at Contemporary Theatre and Uptown Players

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There's a happy, bouncy lilt to the writing of Preston Jones and Charles Busch. Their plays are nothing alike, but, man, their use of language surely is music to the ears. In new productions of Jones' lovely 1974 comedy *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, now playing at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, and Busch's 1999 carnival of camp *Die, Mommy, Die!*, onstage at Uptown Players, the actors let the language of these writers sing, hitting every note and nuance of the eccentric dialogue.



Sue Loncar (right) shines as West Texas divorcée Lu Ann Hampton Laverty in CTD's latest (with John Venable and Kevin Grammer, left and center).

Details:

Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander continues through May 6 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 214-828-0094.

In the Jones play, the middle work in his *Texas Trilogy* of sentimental comedies about the denizens of fictional Bradleyville, words roll like

tumbleweeds. Jones was a master of the dialect of modestly educated folk. They say "shore" instead of "sure," and "ah speck ah better" for "I expect I'd better." It's as difficult as Mamet-speak for some actors to get their tongues around.

The Busch play's style is the heightened, histrionic glamah-talk of old Hollywood movies, seeded with intentionally jarring nuggets of nastiness. "You're nothing but a cheap, hopped-up nymphomaniac!" the Lolita-like daughter screams at her faded siren of a mother. The old gal's singing voice, the kid says, has developed a "vibrato as wide as Mr. Ed's asshole."

Lu Ann and *Die, Mommy, Die!* are broad comedies about mothers and daughters written with an appreciation for the playfulness of word choice. The Jones play is the more artful, certainly. Set in West Texas, it was born at the Dallas Theater Center in the 1970s, when the writer-actor, then in his 30s, started penning *Lu Ann* during slow moments at his box office job. Another of the trilogy, *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*, was performed first at DTC. Then came *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* and *The Oldest Living Graduate*, which blend many of the same characters and events into overlapping scenarios.

These were huge hits at DTC back in the day, compared by critics at the time to the plays of Tennessee Williams. Both writers had that sharp ear for the odd ways down-home people express themselves. Jones, who died in 1979 at the age of 43, also adopted a device Williams frequently used to advance the plot, allowing characters to tell stories about other characters, which turns the audience into gossip-hungry eavesdroppers.

A good piece of that storytelling happens in the second act of *Lu Ann*. It's 1963 and Lu Ann is in her late 20s and already divorced. After a long day's work rattling hair at the beauty "saloon," she sits in a beer joint and jaws with a guy named Corky about the dumb get-rich-quick schemes her no-good brother Skip has tried and failed at. One involved raising chinchillas. "He had 'em about a month when the first norther blew in," says Lu Ann, played in Contemporary's production by Sue Loncar. "Course Skip was off drunk somewhere and didn't plug in the 'lectric heater he had in there to keep 'em warm, so they all froze. Poor little old things all humped up in them wire cages froze stiff. Skip came back home and tried to skin 'em, but it was too late then."

Even reading it in print, you know that "wire" should become "war" in the saying of it. This funny, ungraceful riff gets a laugh if underplayed. Punching the humor Minnie Pearl-style ruins it. That's the trick with a Jones script. His plays rise and fall with the gentle, natural cadences of everyday speech.

The cast at Contemporary seems to get that, like they've been drilled by director René Moreno to find the musical sound of how their characters talk, but not to overdo it. Moreno, Dallas theater's best and most in-demand stage director, is notoriously picky about stuff like that. He wants actors letter-perfect with the script, no deviation from what the playwright intended. He pares away at extraneous movement onstage and forces actors to speak in normal, conversational tones to draw an audience into the intimacy of scenes.

In this *Lu Ann*, reviewed on the second night of the run, the 11-member ensemble had it down, like they'd been

playing these parts for months. These are tough roles. We get a title character who must mature from the first act's giggly teenage cheerleader (Catherine DuBord, playing the young Lu Ann and later her belligerent daughter Charmaine) to flirty divorcée in the second to weary middle-aged family provider in the third. The brother, Skip, played by Ashley Wood, starts out headstrong as a young "Ko-REE-uhn" war vet bent on success and ends the play a broken-spirited old man pathetically begging for pocket change from his sister. Lu Ann's mother, played by Morgana Shaw, is a still-pretty nurse early on, a stroke-frozen grandmother at the end.

Into this come all the men in Lu Ann's life over 20 years, from her high school beau (played by the appropriately named Beau Trujillo) to her husbands (Kevin Moore, John Venable), neighbors (Nye Cooper, Harry Reinwald, J. Rod Pannek) and bartender (Kevin Grammer). It's a play about the curveballs life tosses, about missed opportunities and wrong roads taken. Lu Ann the younger dreams big; by her 40s she's happy just to run into an old friend who remembers her as the pretty cheerleader she once was.

What a play, full of humor and heartbreak. And what a cast Moreno has assembled for this production. This director always does tiptop work, but with this production he has achieved two important milestones. He's revived a Preston Jones play in the style in which it was first performed three decades ago. And he's done something other directors have tried and failed to do: Turned Sue Loncar into a by-gawd wonderful actress.

Loncar is the artistic director of and resident leading lady at Contemporary Theatre, which she founded more than

five years ago in a hulking converted church building off Lower Greenville Avenue. Casting her in anything isn't easy. She's tall, skinny but top-heavy and in her 40s, too old for ingénues and too young for Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit*. Loncar's own Texas drawl is as thick as gravy and when she wants to get dramatic onstage she has a tendency to throw her hands on her hips, jut out her chin and bray.

She's been up and down in starring roles, mostly dithering Southern mothers such as M'Lynn in *Steel Magnolias* and Boo in *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*. But with *Lu Ann*, Loncar has arrived at last, finding her center as an actress and turning in a performance that is relaxed, confident and ultimately very moving.

Uptown goes to town with plays like this—a send-up of 1960s Douglas Sirk-style movie melodramas starring a man as the ultra-glamorous heroine. Only Dallas' own *en traveste* expert Coy Covington could so delectably convey the Stanwyck-ian allure of Angela Arden, an aging chanteuse cuckolding her fat movie producer husband (Jim Johnson) with a slick-haired but untrustworthy tennis pro (Cameron McElyea). Conspiring to murder her are slut-icious daughter Edie (Leslie Patrick) and psycho-babbling son Lance (Chad Peterson).

Uptown couldn't do Busch plays if they didn't have Covington, an actor who can convey in one twist of his perfectly lacquered lips both menace and mockery. He has a cult of fans at this theater, where he also played the female lead in Busch's similarly movie-spoofy *Red Scare on Sunset*. In *Die, Mommy, Die!* Covington earns rafter-shaking laughter with his exquisitely timed gestures, precision-crafted head-

snaps and, wait, just where is that key light? Oh, *there* it is.

The plot of the show is too silly for words (rent the Bette Davis movie *Dead Ringers* if you're spoiling for spoilers), but the silliness is what it's all about (dig the LSD trip scene, baby). Directed by Andi Allen, this one also boasts the most lavish costumes (designed by Suzi Shankle) of any Uptown show this season. When's the last time you heard a crowd ooh, aah and applaud for a Schiaparelli-pink sheath worn by a man?