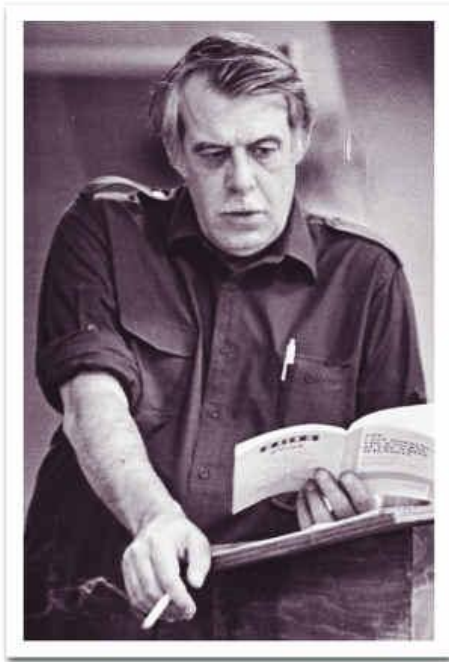


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**Lawson Taitte:  
Like his plays, Jones  
is hard to forget**

Preston Jones called his last play *Remember*. Nearly 28 years after his death following surgery at age 43, that title seems a call from the grave of a writer who had a six-year run as the king of regionalism in American theater and the pride of the Dallas Theater Center.



**In his day, Preston Jones was the king of regional theater, and theaters continue to mount productions of his plays. Contemporary Theatre of Dallas will open his *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* tonight.**

Lots of Dallas folks do remember Mr. Jones – both artists who worked with him and audience members who saw his plays beginning with the *Bradleyville Trilogy*, which premiered

at the Theater Center in installments during 1973 and 1974. Those three plays, renamed the *Texas Trilogy*, created a furor at Washington's Kennedy Center and ignited controversy when they got a mixed reception on Broadway.

Theaters all over the country keep Mr. Jones' memory alive because they keep producing those three plays. Irving's ICT Mainstage mounted the third, *The Oldest Living Graduate*, just last year. Tonight, Contemporary Theatre of Dallas opens the middle work, *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, in its first professional treatment here in many years.

After all this time, it's hard to believe just how hot Preston Jones was in his day. Lady Bird Johnson was a big fan. Tennessee Williams' agent, Audrey Wood, fell in love with the trilogy and worked hard to bring all the playwright's work to New York. And some national critics called him Mr. Williams' successor. His face adorned the covers of *The Smithsonian* and *Saturday Review* before his work got to New York. Perhaps one reason the critics there weren't overly enthusiastic was that he already had been "discovered."

Dallas greeted the news of Mr. Jones' death with shock. Editorials and columns poured out for days. Even the hostile *New York Times'* drama columnist Mel Gussow wrote a long appreciation wondering whether New York had misjudged the *Trilogy* and the playwright.

The spring after Mr. Jones died, an all-star cast led by Henry Fonda, George Grizzard, Harry Dean Stanton and Cloris Leachman did a live national NBC telecast of *The Oldest Living Graduate* from the stage of Southern Methodist University's Bob Hope Theatre.

The irony of that tribute was that Mr. Jones had had nothing to do with SMU, and Mr. Fonda was woefully miscast in the broadly comic leading role of Col. Kinkaid. The part had been tailor-made for Dallas' favorite actor, Randy Moore, who that night sat in the audience with the playwright's widow, Theater Center associate director Mary Sue Jones.

Mr. Moore says that, at the party afterward, Mr. Fonda snubbed him. That's OK, though. Nobody remembers that the great movie star attempted the role, and nobody who remembers Mr. Moore in it will forget him.



George Wada

**John Venable (left), Kevin Grammer and Sue Loncar star in a new production of *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* .**

Mr. Jones began writing his *Trilogy* in quiet moments as he was manning the Theater Center box office. Col. Kinkaid uproariously causes a commotion in the first play, *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*. *The Oldest Living Graduate*, written last, provides the back story to that adventure and shows the consternation the colonel causes his extended family.

*Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* takes an even broader view, looking at the life and serial marriages of its ex-cheerleader title character (created by Mary Baker, at that time known as Mary Rohde, and to be played by Sue Loncar in Contemporary Theatre's new production).

Synthia Rogers, director of theater at the Greenhill School, also was in the

original cast. In fact, she created roles in four of the six plays Mr. Jones premiered at the Theater Center – including my favorite, *Remember*. As the playwright's most frequent leading lady, her memories have a special authority.

"Number one, Preston was a wonderful actor. Maybe people don't remember that," Ms. Rogers says. "He was very unpretentious and very sweet and caring.

"One reason he started writing these plays is that we had all these Texas actors doing French and British plays. He said we needed plays for them. When I did Preston's plays, I thought, 'Thank God, I can be a good ol' Texas girl,' " she says. "I think his death was a real tragedy for the Theater Center."

My most poignant memory connected to the playwright was from a performance of *Remember* at a short-lived professional theater in downtown Houston, about a year after Mr. Jones' death. I made a special trip down because it seemed that the final play was a breakthrough. It was Mr. Jones' most mature and most moving work, but – despite the valiant Ms. Wood's ardent attempts – it never made it to New York or much of anywhere outside of Dallas and Houston.

In that tiny theater, about where Houston's convention center sits now, Mary Sue Jones (who survived her husband by just 12 years) was sitting front and center in the row ahead of me.

Tears were streaming down her face. She was remembering, as were we all.

*Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander*, tonight at 8 through May 6. Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, 5601 Sears St. \$27, discounts. 214-828-0094, [www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com](http://www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com).