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## Park Cities People

### **A New *Lu Ann* for Dallas**

CTD's new production recalls the mid-'70s original



Photo: George Wada

**Sue Loncar** (rear) and **Catherine DuBord** play the title character of Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander at different stages of her life in the new production at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas. The play originally premiered at the Dallas Theater Center.

**By Rita Faye Smith**  
Special Contributor

For those of us who were around at the time, it is almost impossible to think of *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* — which opens this weekend in a new production at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas — without recalling the world premiere of *The Texas Trilogy*.

On November 19, 1974, the legendary Paul Baker, founding artistic director of Dallas Theater Center, directed a performance of all three plays by the late Preston Jones: *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*, *Lu Ann*, and *The Oldest Living Graduate*.

Opening night of this marathon on DTC's mainstage Kalita Humphreys Theater was truly an affair to remember. I attended this event with my father and my teenage daughter, spanning three generations — not unlike the Hampton family of the plays.

The evening began with appetizers. A salad followed Act I. The main course — barbecue with all the trimmings — followed Act II. Dessert followed the final curtain. The cast received a standing ovation in an era of Dallas theater when, unlike today, the audience didn't automatically pop up like a jack-in-

the box.

Robyn Baker Flatt, founding artistic director of Dallas Children's Theater (and Paul Baker's daughter), recalls that night as well.

"The evening proceeded in a timeline fashion through the separate acts of each play," she said.

That night was the culmination of three separate premieres over the course of the previous year. Jones's first play, *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*, was performed at DTC's Down Center Stage on December 4, 1973. *Lu Ann* followed two months later.

The original Claudine Hampton, Lu Ann's mother, was created by Synthia Rogers, current director of theater at Greenhill School in Addison. Rogers said Claudine was "a good ol' West Texas woman, salt of the earth."

Having the playwright on hand for the rehearsals was a boon to her. She recalled a behind-the-scenes incident in which she felt dizzy during rehearsal. She later discovered the cause of her dizziness: impending motherhood.

She told Preston Jones of her dilemma, and "He wrote me an exit," she said.

Sallie Baker, also one of Paul Baker's daughters and now an English and drama teacher in Denver, created the role of Lu Ann. She recalls the same atmosphere of near-improvisation.

"Preston asked me to play Lu Ann," Baker said. "When I asked him why, he said he wanted a pretty girl. I had a hand-printed copy of the script," she said, explaining that "Preston didn't type."

Synthia Rogers also recalled the occasion during rehearsals when Paul Baker's wife Kitty suggested it would be fun to do all three plays (including the trilogy's third play, *The Oldest Living Graduate*) in one night — the suggestion that led to that memorable marathon.

How long was it?

"During one of those nights when we did all three shows," Rogers said, "there was such a long time between my first and last entrance that I had time to go be a bridesmaid in a wedding [at a nearby church]."

The role of Lu Ann was written to be played by the same actress throughout, aging over a 20-year time span, as Sallie Baker did in the original and Diane Ladd did in the Broadway production.

Lu Ann "was an optimistic character," Baker recalled. "she had some very tough things that happened to her."

Rene Moreno, director of the production opening April 13 at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, has made an interesting choice of casting 17-year-old Lu Ann and her 17-year-old daughter, Charmaine, with the same actress, Catherine Dubord.

CTDs artistic director, Sue Loncar, is playing the role of Lu Ann at 27 and 37.

Robyn Flatt, who created the role of Martha Ann Sickenger in *The Oldest Living Graduate*, says that there's something timeless about Preston Jones's plays.

“Preston captured the grit of West Texas living,” she said. “You could feel the sand; you could feel the land. You get these wonderful battles of wills between people. Preston just struck a very true and honest note.”

*Lu Ann Hampton Lavity Oberlander*. Contemporary Theatre of Dallas. 5601 Sears St., Dallas. 7:30 p.m. Thurs., 8 p.m. Fri. & Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. (except Apr. 15). Through May 6.