

# Jones Trilogy Triumphant on CTD Stage

By Alexandra Bonifield

Contemporary Theatre of Dallas proves once again that its creative team can create an enjoyable, thought-provoking dramatic experience that could earn ovations in any US performance milieu, regional to national. Their current production is Part Three of Preston Jones' 1970's much-lauded domestic drama Texas Trilogy— "The Oldest Living Graduate". This play is oddly flawed and presents serious onstage challenges, yet CTD's production entertains and gently instructs its audience, sending it out into the night mulling over the subject matter and aching for more such skillful, artistic performances.

Problem #1: the Main Character.

Colonel Kinkaid is indeed the "oldest living graduate" of a military school that sent lads off to WWI, and the only one still alive. He carries the show from his wheelchair, inspires the play's conflict, almost never leaves the stage, and is a suffering, insufferably rude, wretched, domineering, partly deaf old man. In less able hands, this character's portrayal could range from obnoxious stereotype to panderingly maudlin. Colonel Kinkaid could so depress an audience he would drive it away at intermission, much as he seems to try to do to everyone in his miserable onstage life. Regional professional John S. Davies brings his fine-tuned acumen and talent to bear in creating a masterful, nuanced Colonel. Yes, he is hard to watch and evokes wince and cringe repeatedly with his cruel rants. But just when he seems about to launch over the top, the actor pulls back and reveals some quiet inner truth that provides justification for the ranting and keeps the audience mesmerized. He must be exactly the sort of actor Jones wrote for. Superlative writing, an exquisite interpretation, and a beautiful marriage of acting with sensitive direction by Cynthia Hestand.

The entire Texas Trilogy set box office records in the 1970's at Washington's Kennedy Center and earned Jones comparison to Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. A 1980 adaptation of this play with Henry Fonda and Cloris Leachman, filmed at SMU, won two Emmy awards for NBC. Which brings me to problem #2.

The Ending.

It's as though the playwright spun his characters to a particularly complex, interesting point then got lost or tired of the whole project and tacked on a trite, predictable conclusion. I never saw the Emmy-winning movie. I wonder if its conclusion matches the stage play's? It was well acted and directed here; but I felt cheated, that the set-up deserved a far more contemplative, respectful denouement. Superfluous characters appear who don't advance the action; others who showed promise early on go nowhere, just stand about. I really enjoyed this production given its acting and directing merits; equally, I didn't believe the play's ending.

Simply stunning: the casting, acting and direction of CTD's Producing Artistic Director Sue Loncar and newcomer Russell DeGrazier as the Colonel's long-suffering daughter-in-law Maureen and son Floyd. Totally believable as a couple with divergent goals and methods of achieving them, the two work together onstage like they've known each other forever. They rub each other raw yet still exhibit that remarkable connecting "juice" that keeps real life couples together. Equally intriguing is Reg Platt as Clarence, Floyd's much tougher-natured business partner. It's a much "smaller" character in number of lines spoken and time on stage; yet Platt holds his own and presents a well-rounded, believable human being. Their final confrontation scene—chilling, nasty and ego-driven—between Floyd and Clarence with their respective wives fanning the flames—could match any power play with sexual overtones devised by Edward Albee. William Earl Ray gives an intriguingly understated and sympathetic performance as the hired man Mike. His character shows real promise in Act One, energized by Ray's soulful acting. Too bad the playwright didn't see fit to take this character anywhere in Act Two.

Once again, CTD production values excel on the technical side, with flawless lighting, period costuming, props, sound and a 60's "ranch style" set that brings back to me, a child of the era, so many happily-smothered memories. Where did they find all that hideously bland kitschy décor? Kudos to Kristen Richter, Russell K. Dyer, Richard Frohlich, Sue Loncar, Tish Mussey and Aaron Patrick Turner.

It's CTD's hallmark: another evening of thoroughly enjoyable theater that plays well to a full, appreciative house. It's worth buying a season pass to CTD's upcoming season, knowing you won't ever come away disappointed, but instead will consistently exit entertained and uplifted, educated and inspired.

"The Oldest Living Graduate" plays at the CTD theatre on Sears St. , just west of lower Greenville Ave. Thursdays through Sundays through June 29.

Tickets: 214-828-0094 [www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com](http://www.contemporarytheatreofdallas.com)