

John S. Davies commands the stage

By Glenn Arbery
Senior Editor

Sometimes a play and a performer match so perfectly that the power generated onstage completely reverses the magnetic field of one's prejudices. Admittedly, I brought a bad attitude to *The Oldest Living Graduate* at Contemporary Theatre of Dallas, primarily against revered playwright Preston Jones. His *Lu Ann Hampton* (which CTD performed last year) struck me as considerably overrated.

But not *The Oldest Living Graduate*. In this tautly plotted, convincing play set in 1962, John S. Davies superbly plays Col. J. C. Kincaid, a veteran who has not been completely well since his days in the trenches of World War I. Wielding his wheelchair aggressively, the irascible old man — Davies plays him with his jaw already jutting in defiance against the offense he's surely about to receive from someone — turns on anyone who tries to control him.

His daughter-in-law Maureen (Sue Loncar) sets him off just trying to be nice. The gossipy Martha Ann Sickenger (Catherine Wall) gets an earful for marrying wheeler-dealer Clarence Sickenger (Reg Platt), and his son Floyd (Russell DeGrazier), who never measures up to the son he lost in World War II, can do nothing to please him.

Worse, Floyd has a plan that will either kill the old man's spirit or ruin Floyd. Working with Clarence Sickenger, he plans to develop the piece of real estate that Col. Kincaid owns on Bradleyville Lake but that he has consistently refused to sell. Why he won't, no one knows — at least no one but Floyd's black handyman Mike Tremaine (William Earl Ray), whose father Carter had been the colonel's friend and fishing partner.

Only to Mike, never to his own son (whose mother he did not love in the same way), Col. Kincaid tells the story of his love of Suzette, daughter of a French family that settled on that piece of land in his youth. Holding onto that land means holding onto a lyricism rapidly vanishing from his world, understood by no one in his own family.

Meanwhile, Floyd intends to bring the famous graduates of Mirabeau B. Lamar Military Academy in Galveston to Bradleyville to honor his father, the oldest living member of the Academy's first graduating class. The event will also be Floyd's chance to introduce many potential buyers to the upscale resort he and Sickenger plan for the colonel's sacred site.

Jones's play brilliantly, oftenly comically, shows off generational tensions and familial anguish — but even more, it reveals the wrenching differences between an honorable, poetic way of seeing the world and the pragmatic approach that dominates modern life.

Davies could not be better as Col. Kincaid. His irascibility, his righteous contempt of the paper soldiers who come to honor him, his lyric recollections, his late evocation of the sounds of a lost world — all of them ring wonderfully true.

Sue Loncar as Maureen and Russell DeGrazier as Floyd bring considerable nuance to their portrayals, as do the other actors. Particularly poignant is the simple gravitas of William Earl Ray as Mike Tremaine.

Saturday night's performance already had a packed house, and I suspect that tickets will be hard to get if Contemporary Theatre of Dallas doesn't extend the run by a week or two. This is one not to miss.