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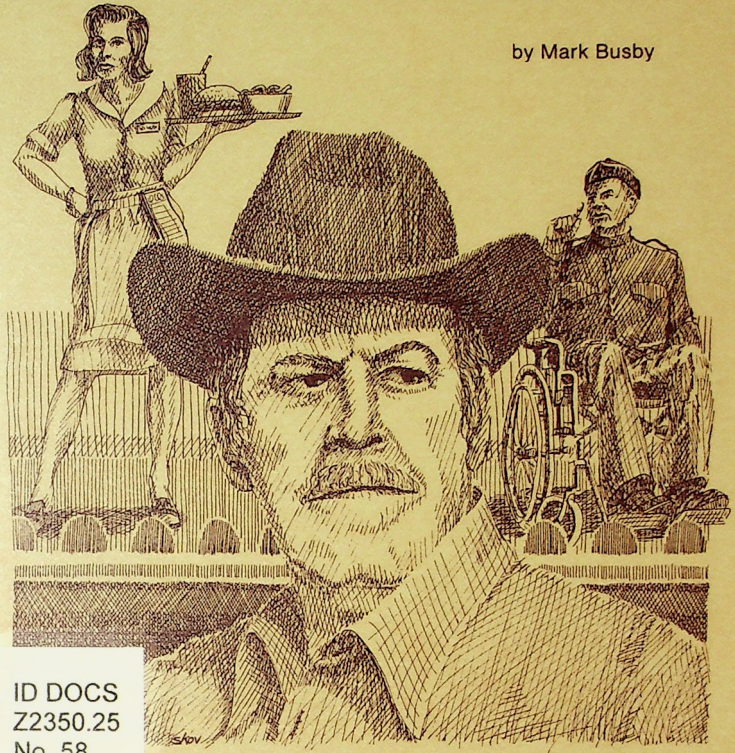


WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

No. 58

PRESTON JONES

by Mark Busby



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Boise State University Western Writers Series Number 58

Preston Jones

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Preston Jones

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When Preston Jones burst upon the national scene, it was like an unknown store clerk strapping on a .45 to take on the established gunslinger in the middle of the street. Suddenly Jones was famous. His picture appeared on the covers of *Smithsonian* and *Saturday Review*. He was the subject of a PBS television special. He was compared with Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. (*Saturday Review's* cover asked: "Has Texas Spawned a New O'Neill?") His three plays, collectively titled *A Texas Trilogy*, enjoyed a great deal of success after they opened at the Dallas Theater Center (where Jones had worked as an actor for thirteen years before he gained recognition as a playwright) and traveled north toward New York. The plays were especially well-received in Washington where, playing in repertory, they had an extended run at the Kennedy Center.

Finally the trilogy opened on three consecutive September nights on Broadway. Clive Barnes in *The New York Times* pronounced:

His plays are not boring—not at all. You watch them with interest, and any of these evenings can be recommended as an unusual and truthful evening in the theatre. But each play is oddly inconclusive. What is Mr. Jones trying to tell us? That life in small towns in Texas is hell? That we might have guessed. But beyond this caring and careful despair, there seems to be no statement, no purpose.

Thus, once labeled as regional plays with lines that sound "like an expanded version of those unmemorably unforgettable quotes from

The Reader's Digest," *A Texas Trilogy* ignobly closed the Broadway run after five weeks, and Preston Jones went back to Texas to write—and to die of bleeding ulcers in September 1979 when he was only forty-three years old.

The sudden rise to fame, the equally sudden closing of his three Texas plays on Broadway, and the early death have given rise to three Preston Jones myths: that he was primarily a Texas playwright, that he suddenly became a playwright with little or no training, and finally, that he was devastated by his poor Broadway reception. While Preston Jones' first and best-known plays were about Texas and while he lived and worked in Dallas, Jones was born, reared, and schooled in New Mexico, and his last three full-length plays are set in his home state.

Preston St. Vrain Jones was born in Albuquerque on April 7, 1936, the son of James Brooks ("Jawbone") and Maud Gwinn St. Vrain Jones. His mother was a grand niece of Colonel Ceran St. Vrain, an early Taos leader and contemporary of Kit Carson. Forty-two when Preston was born, she suffered a stroke when he was a young man, but ironically she outlived her son. She may have provided the outline for Lu Ann's invalid mother in *Lu Ann Hampton Lavery Oberlander*.

Jones' father was a more important influence despite the fact that he died on August 9, 1947, when Preston was only eleven. Born in Edgefield, South Carolina, in 1886, Jawbone joined the Marine Corps in 1912 and served in the Philippines, Haiti, Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), and Nicaragua. During World War I he was wounded in France, suffering injuries that eventually caused his death. He was a member of the Elks for twenty-nine years, and the Elks were in charge of his funeral. These features—military service and membership in a fraternal order—are reminiscent of Jones' character, Colonel J. C. Kincaid, of both *The Last Meeting of the*

Knights of the White Magnolia and *The Oldest Living Graduate*.

And, in fact, his father seemed to have been a character in his own right. Jawbone was a Procter and Gamble salesman in New Mexico for many years. His nickname came from *jabon*, the Spanish word for soap, Procter and Gamble's primary product. Shortly after World War I, Jawbone supposedly left his family in South Carolina and traveled to Colorado to write Western novels. Having no success, he went back home, picked up his family, and ended up selling soap with Procter and Gamble.

Jawbone was actively interested in politics, and he served as the lieutenant governor of New Mexico for two terms, from 1943 to 1946, during Governor John J. Dempsey's administrations. In an editorial tribute after Jones' death, *The Albuquerque Morning Journal* said: "His jocular and jovial habits made him a popular figure but back of that exterior was a man of character and integrity."

Preston, the youngest child in the family, had two sisters and one brother. His sisters were thirteen and fifteen when Preston was born, and the older, Charlotte, found him a surprising family addition. When she first saw him in the hospital, noting his large eyes, she responded, "I don't care if you call him Barney Google." From then on, Preston Jones was "B. G." to his family. All of his family relationships became very important to his plays, and, although he frequently asserted that his characters were not based on real persons, it is clear that Jones drew heavily from his family background as he wrote.

Jones grew up in New Mexico, attending public school in Albuquerque and then St. Michael's, a private Catholic boys' school in Santa Fe. In high school he played baseball and basketball with a Hi-Y group he described as "a mixture of everything . . . a weird bunch" who refused to attend the pep rallies. His love of baseball continued, and as an adult he played with a semi-pro team.

After he graduated from Highland High School in Albuquerque in 1954, Jones entered the University of New Mexico, first planning to be a park ranger until, as he once said, he decided he would look ridiculous in a ranger's hat. In 1958, shortly before he graduated with a degree in speech and a teaching certificate, he became interested in drama after his sister Charlotte convinced him to try out for a play. Although he was exhilarated by the experience, he was too far along in his program to change majors. Following graduation, Jones taught speech for a semester in Tucumcari, New Mexico, and he also worked as a chain man for the Texas Highway Department in Colorado City, Texas, which later became the mythical Bradleyville of the trilogy. (Colorado City is in Texas, but it confused some early reviewers who thought Jones lived in Colorado.) In Colorado City he was married for a short time, had a daughter, and learned of the land, the language, and the people that would fill his first plays.

Before long, Eddie Snapp, a drama professor at the University of New Mexico, convinced him to return to the University to take drama courses and work on the shows. In return, Snapp would help him find a graduate school where Jones could study directing, which interested him more than any other aspect of drama at the time. Because Snapp had known Paul Baker at Yale, Snapp recommended that Jones apply to Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Baker was then teaching there and commuting from Dallas, where he was director of the Dallas Theater Center, housed in the magnificent building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Jones was accepted and began attending Baylor. After a semester of working with Jones, Baker invited him to become part of the Theater Center while pursuing his degree, and Jones accepted.

In 1963, in a dispute with the Baylor administration over Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Baker left Baylor and became associated with Trinity University in San Antonio. By this

time Jones had completed all requirements for a master's degree except a thesis. The graduate dean at Trinity agreed to accept all his hours, so Jones transferred there to complete the thesis under Baker.

The popular myth about Jones is that, without training, he just decided to write a play after reading several mediocre plays submitted to a Dallas Theater Center contest. In fact, Jones had previous experience writing plays. As an undergraduate at New Mexico he had taken a playwrighting class and had written several fraternity skits. In graduate school at Trinity, he first wrote a long prerequisite play. Then, his master's thesis for Baker was an adaptation of Davis Grubb's 1953 novel, *The Night of the Hunter*, for the stage, especially for the Dallas Theater Center's revolving stage.

Choosing Grubb's novel as his thesis subject was an interesting story arising out of Jones' experience working on the Theater Center's recent adaptations of two novels for the stage: Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, adapted by Trinity professor Robert L. Flynn and retitled *Journey to Jefferson*. (Flynn's 1967 novel *North to Yesterday* would also influence Jones' work.) *Journey to Jefferson* was especially important. Jones noted in the introduction to his thesis: "The staging problems of *As I Lay Dying* are similar to those of the thesis play. Both have scenes requiring a variety of locales, a river and the action of characters who must travel from one geographical point to another." Jones, in fact, had acted in the play and had seen firsthand how certain technical problems had been handled.

Jones' adaptation, as he later noted, suffered from being overwritten and having rather stilted dialogue. The novel does not lend itself to staging for just the reasons Jones was attracted to it: too many locales, too many characters, too much time to cover. The story, set in the Ohio River region of West Virginia in the 1930s, concerns a family whose father had stolen \$10,000 from a bank and killed two men in

the process. Before he is captured and sentenced to hang, Ben Harper hides the money in his daughter's doll and tells his son where the money is. In prison awaiting his fate, Harper shares a cell with an obsessed preacher, Harry Powell, who decides to woo Harper's widow in hopes of getting the money to build a church. After Harper's death, Powell shows up in Cresap's Landing and introduces himself as the prison chaplain. He soon marries Willa Harper and begins his hunt for the money. Along the way he menaces the two children, John and Pearl, reveals his woman-hating obsession, and eventually murders Willa before he is finally wounded and captured by a good-hearted woman named Miz Cooper.

The play does not reveal the talent for language or humor that Jones' later works display. In them, though, he would use language with which he was familiar, and he would not be limited by a pre-existing document as he was in the thesis. Since the thesis is based on a naturalistic novel rather than a comic one, it is unreasonable to expect much humor. But even when Jones attempts humor in the thesis, it is ineffective. However, despite its weakness, the thesis' language is important because it shows Jones trying to use a regional dialect for the first time.

There are two significant motifs in Jones' thesis play that return later in his own work. The first concerns the strong anti-materialistic theme in *The Night of the Hunter*. The preacher's desire to possess the money provides his motivation; later Jones uses Floyd's desire to possess the Genet farm as one of the major motivating devices in *The Oldest Living Graduate*. The second motif concerns the presence of strong, humane characters. One of the reasons Jones was led to Grubb's novel was because of its characters. In the thesis chapter concerning problems, he writes: "I was especially attracted to the simple, human and real qualities of the novel's characters." Miz Cooper, for example, is a prototype of the independent, con-

cerned women who often appear in Jones' later plays.

The most important thing about Jones' thesis play is that it demonstrates that the man who seemed to become an overnight playwright in the 1970s had studied his craft, especially how to use scenes to create the rhythm of a play. In the last chapter of the thesis, he notes, "I was concerned with turning chapters [of the novel] into scenes and pondering over builds, drops and scene changes."

When Jones received the master's degree from Trinity University in 1966, he had been a resident artist at the Dallas Theater Center for five years and had developed what would be a lifelong friendship with Paul Baker. At the Theater Center he made another extremely important association: Mary Sue Fridge, who became his second wife. He met her when she became a last-minute substitute for the title character in *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. Jones told an interviewer: "The first time I saw Mary Sue was when she came on as the madwoman with this fantastic makeup and her hair all up. I'll never forget, my first line was, 'Who was that?' I've never said a line in my entire career with such honesty. I literally leaped up."

They were married on Labor Day in 1964 and moved into a modest house they rented on Beverly Drive in Dallas' posh Highland Park area where they lived until Jones' death. Mary Sue, originally from Carthage, Missouri, had received a master's degree from Baylor and joined the Theater Center company in 1959 when the theater began. More interested in design than in acting or playwrighting, Mary Sue Jones significantly influenced her husband's work, and she designed the sets for the trilogy when the plays opened in Dallas. When Paul Baker retired in 1982, Mary Sue became the acting director of the Dallas Theater Center, and she remains an important element in the theater's success.

During the years between writing the thesis and gaining his initial success with *A Texas Trilogy*, Jones continued to work at the Dallas

Theater Center as an actor, director, set builder, box office clerk, and truck driver. He played Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, Drummond in *Inherit the Wind*, Victor in *The Price*, and the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, among others. He directed *The Knack*, *Barefoot in the Park*, *Under the Yum Yum Tree*, and assisted Baker on many shows. He was the assistant director to Robert Anderson for the first American Playwrights Theater. Even though Jones wrote no plays during this time, they were a creative seven years. He worked on the plays that would influence his writing, and, most importantly, sharpened his ear for the rhythm of drama. He knew he was part of a skilled company; he watched it at work; he learned the subjects and the methods that move audiences.

In 1972 Jones became the managing director of Down Center Stage, Paul Baker's fifty-six-seat workshop theater, where Jones wanted to present new plays by local playwrights. When he discovered that few plays were satisfactory, he decided to write his own. "I found," he said, "that almost every play being written reflected a few neurotic characters living in New York, Los Angeles or London. It made me think that, by God, I'll try writing a play about Texas." It was, of course, no accident, for he had studied writing at New Mexico and Trinity.

In fact, he had been thinking about a play based on his Colorado City experience for several years. He told Patrick Bennett shortly before he died how the three plays of the trilogy were generated:

The first two plays, *Lu Ann* and *Knights*, they're plays I had thought about for a long time. When I started *Lu Ann*, I invented the little town of Bradleyville. After I had done that I thought: aha, that's a perfect setting for this *Knights* play that I'm going to write. Then in the third play I knew the character I wanted to write about was the colonel. *Knights* and *Lu Ann* had already been

produced before I wrote *Oldest Living Graduate*. (*Talking with Texas Writers*, p. 167)

Jones began *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* in the spring of 1973. When he finished it, he immediately wrote *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*. *Knights* premiered first at Down Center Stage, on December 4, 1973, and ran for thirteen performances. A month and a half later, on February 5, 1974, *Lu Ann* opened and also ran for the prearranged thirteen performances. In the spring of 1974 Baker decided to move eight of the original plays that had been done in the small experimental theater to the larger Kalita Humphreys Theater for an offering called Playmarket '74, which was to be a retrospective of the 1973-1974 season. Among the plays were *Lu Ann* and *Knights*. The headliner was to be *Jack Ruby: All-American Boy*, a multi-media show written mainly by another Baker student, John Logan, in collaboration with Baker. But the popular favorites, Suzanne Shelton points out in the September 1974 *Texas Monthly*, were Jones' two plays.

Among those attending Playmarket were Audrey Wood, the literary agent who discovered Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and Arthur Kopit; and Alan Schneider, noted director who took John Houseman's place as head of the drama division at Juilliard. Wood, recognizing Jones' ability, arranged to become his literary agent. Schneider convinced his Arena Stage associate Zelda Fichandler to schedule a production of *Knights* for a Washington performance.

Thus, Jones' career as a playwright was underway. His success with the first two plays led him to write *The Oldest Living Graduate*, which premiered at Down Center Stage in November 1974. It was written mainly while Jones manned the Theater Center box office. The next spring the Theater Center presented all three plays in a marathon performance that began at 7 p.m. and lasted until 2 a.m.

with a 10 p.m. break for dinner. The three plays together were called at the time *The Bradleyville Trilogy*, not *A Texas Trilogy*. Laughingly, Jones called the show *A Long Day's Journey into West Texas*.

Next, *Knights* was chosen as a 1975 offering of the American Playwrights Theater, which assured its production by repertory and college theaters around the country. Then, Jones received a Rockefeller scholarship to work on new plays, and Wood arranged for the *Trilogy* to have a trial run at Washington's Kennedy Center with Schneider directing, the Kennedy Center production to take place before a planned Broadway opening.

Jones' career had taken off. At the Kennedy Center his plays were especially well-received. They played to large, enthusiastic audiences. Richard L. Coe of *The Washington Post* wrote a long review of the three plays titled "'A Texas Trilogy': In Affirmation of Wonder" and stated:

"A Texas Trilogy" is far and away the most creative theater yet offered by the Kennedy Center: new, compelling, affirmative plays by a sensitive observer of the human comedy, richly staged in myriad detail. Not since the late '40s, when Miller and Williams were breaking in on us, has one heard so assured, so American a dramatic voice. (*The Washington Post*, 9 May 1976, p. K1)

The Washington success spawned more publicity. Bruce Cook did a story for the May 15, 1976, issue of *Saturday Review*, and the editors decided to make it the cover story. The cover presents Jones in Levis jacket and Stetson hat banging on a weathered barn door, symbolic, perhaps, of his upcoming attempt to break into the most important arena in American theater. The caption reads, "Preston Jones: Has Texas Spawned a New O'Neill?" *The Smithsonian* also had Jones on the cover, and it ran a long piece filled with pictures from the Washington production. Everything was going right for Preston

Jones and *A Texas Trilogy*.

And there was every reason for the plays to be well-received. They are tightly constructed works that breathe Jones' major theme: the effect of time, particularly on the people that he knew best—Southwesterners—and the frontier values that had molded them. It was a regional—not a provincial—view of a universal theme. When he was in New York, he wrote an article for *The New York Times* called "Reflections on a 'Trilogy'" in which he mentioned seeing the name Smith on the inspections plaque in the Algonquin Hotel elevator for ten years in a row. Then the name suddenly changed to Johnson. Jones wrote:

It's things like that that get me started on writing. Since I live in Texas that's where I set my plays. I do that because I know the country and people. I like to tell stories about the people. If I were to write a play about New York, I'd most likely write about someone like Smith and what time did to him. Because there is his name down all those years—and then some other guy's name appears on the wall. (*New York Times*, 17 October 1976, p. D3)

He went on to state more explicitly how important time's effect was to him:

I think I'm a story-teller playwright. But whatever the story is, for me it would always involve "time" because time is not the sun going up and down every day. It is not a clock. It is not a calendar. Time is an eroding, infinite mystery. Time is, in fact, a son-of-a-bitch.

Jones' plays explore the extent of that remark. For Preston Jones, as for many other Southwestern writers, the real tragedy of the Southwest results from the cataracts, the divides, the inevitable wrenching away from the old that the passing of time causes. In

some cases, Jones can laugh at the results of the changes, for he realizes that the frontier is an impossible ideal. In actuality a fleeting border between wilderness and civilization that recedes as soon as it is reached, the frontier and its attendant values can only exist in a timeless world. As Jones' plays make clear, that is indeed an impossible ideal. One way to face the inexorable loss, Jones suggests, is with a loud Black Humor laugh.

Jones' pain from the loss, however, is only partial. Like Larry McMurtry, who once stated that his ambivalence about the Southwest cut "as deep as the bone," Jones both laments and embraces the passing of some of the old values. Each play in the trilogy, in fact, seems to examine a different Southwestern frontier value. Larry Goodwyn in "The Frontier Myth and Southwestern Literature" identifies the basic aspects of the frontier legacy this way:

The [frontier] legend is pastoral: the courageous men conquered nature, but at the same time were "at one" with nature. The legend is inherently masculine: women are not so much without "courage" as missing altogether; cowgirls did not ride up the Chisholm Trail. The legend is primitively racialistic: it provided no mystique of triumph for Mexicans, Negroes, or Indians. (*Library Journal*, February 1971, p. 161)

Jones' *A Texas Trilogy* examines each of these values: *The Oldest Living Graduate* is concerned with the loss of the natural world; *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* deals with women in the Southwest; and *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia* presents the racism of the Southwest.

All of the plays in the trilogy are set in Bradleyville, Texas, based on Colorado City, where Jones lived at the end of the fifties. At first, Jones had no plan to write a trilogy using a county comparable to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, but he soon became enamored of his

imaginary place, going so far as writing an imaginary advertising brochure and drawing a map of Bradleyville for *The Washington Post*.

The Hill and Wang edition of the trilogy begins with an introduction to the town and the families that inhabit it. Bradleyville is described as a "small, dead West Texas town" of 6,000 in "the middle of a big, dead West Texas prairie The new highway has bypassed it and now the world is trying to." The setting is significant, for it suggests the naturalistic emphasis that Jones gave to the land's effect on the people.

Jones claimed that he wrote with no specific thematic purpose. He was mainly a storyteller concerned with people: "I just write stories. There are no hidden meanings, no cleverly disguised symbolism, no messages I'm trying to get across." But one type that attracted him was the self-sufficient woman:

I was working for the Highway Department in West Texas. The crew would eat many meals at "Dixie Dinettes" and truckstops when on the job. When I'd eat at these places I kept noticing, along with the other guys, the waitresses. Or we'd drive over to Big Spring, sometimes, for a beer. And I'd watch the waitresses we'd come across there. And there were Lu Anns all around. I'd wonder, "What is this girl's background: How old is she? Has she been married before?" Although I never did sit down with one of those wonderful girls and interview her about her life, I suppose I was even then putting together bits and pieces of information that eventually became Lu Ann's story. (*New York Times*, 17 October 1976, p. D3)

These individual stories intertwined with Jones' concern for time and Southwestern values. Several titles, for example, contain references to time: the "last," the "oldest," and "remember." Lu Ann's

different names illustrate the passage of time and suggest the traditional way women have been defined: as adjuncts to their husbands.

The setting for each act reinforces the emphasis on Lu Ann's status at various times in her life. Act I takes place in 1953. Lu Ann is a Bradleyville cheerleader described as "Pepsodent and Ivory Soap pretty." As she and Billy Bob Wortman plan their trip to the senior picnic, her materialistic values at the time become clear: what is important to her is that she and Billy Bob get to go to the picnic in Billy Bob's daddy's "step-down Hudson Hornet." Dreaming that she will travel to Europe, she instead meets Dale Laverty, who, like the old Frontiersman, hopes to attain El Dorado or find the new Eden. But Dale's is a trailer park in Abilene or Snyder: "You pull into one of them trailer parks, you see, an' they got ever' thang. Gas, water, washin' machines, swings, septic tanks, some even got swimmin' pools. . . . And grass and trees and collie dogs runnin' around" (*A Texas Trilogy*, p. 155).

"Gee, it sounds like heaven," says Lu Ann, and she marries him. But in Act II, set ten years later in 1963, we learn that the trailer park did not turn out to be Eden after all. Lu Ann describes the trailers as "[c]ramped, miserable little old tin-boxie outfits—burn up all summer and freeze off all winter." And of trailer parks she says: "[M]ight as well live on a tumbleweed farm. Two or three burnt-up little old trees, a couple of splintery teeter-totters, and five hundred rattlesnakes." The snake is in the garden, and Dale runs over the collie when he leaves Lu Ann.

The redoubtable Lu Ann marries Corky Oberlander, a highway inspector she meets in Red's Bar, and that leads to Act III, again set ten years later in 1973. Widowed when Corky was run over by a road machine, Lu Ann is no longer a beauty operator either; ironically she is in charge of the Howdy Wagon. Her job is to welcome new people into this dying town that the highway bypassed. She is a survivor,

but she has endured to see her dreams die, her days turn into a life of boredom. She now believes what her mother said: "You know, mah mama once told me that them times [her high school days] would be the happiest of mah life, and lookin' back on it all, ah believe she mighta been right." When Billy Bob, now a Kansas City preacher home for a visit, admonishes her that it wastes the Lord's time to dwell on the past, she retorts: "Oh, pshaw. The Lord's got lots of time to waste. It's us the clock runs down on!" (*A Texas Trilogy*, pp. 226-27).

As the first play Jones wrote in the trilogy, *Lu Ann* demonstrates not only the significance of Jones' emphasis on the theme of time, but it also contains most of his other major concerns: his ambivalence toward his subject, the dichotomy between stasis and motion, his humor, and his focus on a group relationship.

Jones reveals his ambivalence mainly through his varied presentation of Lu Ann. On the one hand, it is through her that Jones satirizes the small town. He presents Lu Ann's long slide from her high school days of dreams to the time when she is a middle-aged woman whose future holds little possibility. On the other hand, she is clearly a survivor, and, in that survival, she is courageous and heroic. Lu Ann does endure this fallen, time-bound world. She cares for her mother who has been left deaf, dumb, and paralyzed by a stroke. When Billy Bob suggests that Claudine is a "terrible burden," Lu Ann answers: "You know, Billy Bob, them doctors told me that Mama would be a vegetable for the rest of her life—can you imagine that? A vegetable! Hell, my mama ain't no vegetable, she's a flower, a great old big pretty flower" (p. 229). And when he advises her that Claudine should be put in a special home, Lu Ann states with conviction: "This is her home, Billy Bob."

Part of the ambivalence concerns another of Jones' main themes. His friend, Bill Porterfield, in a newspaper column titled "The Texas

of Jones, Green, and Graves” pointed out that all three writers “work the same field. It is the conflict between inertia and motion” (*Dallas Times Herald*, 6 April 1980, p. M3). Lu Ann’s life demonstrates this conflict clearly. As a young high schooler, she longs to travel:

I was sittin’ in study hall the other day and I got to lookin’ at a picture there on the wall of one of them castles they got over there to Europe and way up in the top part of it was this little tiny door and I got to thinking to myself, boy, what I wouldn’t give to git outta here for a spell and goover yonder to where that castle is. Climb up there and open that little door and look out at the trees and gardens and such like and holler out, “Hey, ever’body, look here, look at me. I’ve just opened the little door that’s at the top of the whole wide world!” (p. 135)

Her tragedy, of course, is that her dream is unfulfilled; she will live for the next twenty years in the dusty roads of West Texas where she must care for her ailing mother and her drunken brother and watch as her daughter appears to be following the same motionless path. Yet perseverance in the eroding world is a virtue.

One way Lu Ann and other Jones’ characters endure is through humor. Even with the play’s seriousness, it contains much humor—mainly on the strength of Lu Ann’s language: the vigorous Southwestern dialect filled with homey similes, puns, and alliterative expressions and racy scatological surprises. Of Dale’s trailer house, she notes: “Dale would blow a fart and my eyes would water for three days.” Of another beautician whose work she does not like, she says: “Maud Lowery gits her hands on you and you walk out lookin’ like a gunny sack. She couldn’t curry a coyote and she’s got the sand to call herself a beautician!” To Milo Crawford, the local mama’s boy, she states: “For God’s sake, Milo, you ain’t got the sense God gave a tumblebug.” When she learns that Corky’s job is to inspect the holes

in the asphalt highway, she exclaims: "Well, you must be doin' a pretty piss-poor job. Ever' goddamned highway in this state is as holey as Billy Graham's mother-in-law," and she advises him: "Git your nose out of the asphalt someday and maybe you'll learn some-thin'." When she sees Billy Bob for the first time since he became a minister, she shouts incongruously: "Well, Jesus Christ on a crutch!"

Through her language, endurance, compassion, and humor, Lu Ann challenges the sexist orientation of the Southwest and, in fact, demonstrates just the opposite: that Southwestern women, while limited by their environment, have been able to define themselves in spite of sexism. Jones does not defend the inherent sexism, but he recognizes the ambiguous position left for strong, competent women. The bold, brassy Southwestern woman will return throughout Jones' plays.

Jones also focuses on another one of his continuing issues in *Lu Ann*: a group relationship. In this play the group is the family, and we see stretched over decades the struggle among family members. Individuals in Jones' plays strive for a cohesive relationship with a larger body, but time works to destroy unity.

Similar concerns are important in *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia*: the effect of time on frontier values, ambivalence, dichotomy between stasis and motion, group relationship, and humor. In this play the frontier takes on a different meaning. Set in 1962, the play takes place when America was at the edge of a racial revolution. John Kennedy's New Frontier administration proposed progressive civil rights legislation that Lyndon Johnson pushed through Congress after Kennedy's assassination in 1963. The frontier attitude that this play takes as its subject is racism, and an appropriate vehicle for satirizing the old is this racist organization, the "Knights of the White Magnolia."

In his "Reflections on a 'Trilogy,'" Jones explained its origin. He

told how, throughout his life, he had had to fill out forms on which he swore that he had never belonged to any organization listed on a lengthy accompanying sheet: "In looking over the list of names, I noticed an organization called The Knights of the White Camelias. The name just stayed in my mind." Years later he again encountered the name and did some research, only to discover the organization no longer existed:

This bit of information started my mind going. I asked myself, "How do you fold up an organization like that? What happens to all the funny hats, the banners, the incense burners and swords, to all the accoutrements and paraphernalia?"

That experience was the beginning of *Knights*.

In it the Knights of the White Magnolia stand to the right of the Klan ("anybody that's got to put on a white bedsheet to kick a coon's ass has got to be a damn fool," says Red Grover). But time has passed; their meetings in the Cattleman's Hotel have turned into Forty-Two games instead of planning sessions. L. D. Alexander, the supermarket manager that Jones played when the play premiered, laments:

People got to where they didn't want to join any more. Can you imagine that? They didn't want to be Knights of the White Magnolia. They wanted to be Jaycees or Toast Masters or Elks or Lions or Moose, they wanted to be by-God animals, that's right, animals, but not Knights. They turned around and stabbed their granddaddies square in the back. (p. 51)

On the night the play takes place, however, there is to be an initiation. Still, the Knights are finished. The initiate cares nothing about their racist ideals; he just wants to play dominoes and horseshoes. Colonel Kincaid, the Knight who owns the hotel, is about to die; and

when he does, his son Floyd will close the Cattleman and end their meetings. That the end is near becomes clear to them all on this night. When the initiation fails, Red states the obvious: "The brotherhood ain't any more. . . . There ain't gonna be no stinking Knights of the White Magnolia cause the Knights of the White Magnolia idea is gone, finished, all washed up" (pp. 112-13).

Again, Jones is concerned with time's effects. This fictional organization, which once had chapters all over Texas and Oklahoma, suffers the ravages of time, and the beliefs which spawned it are forgotten. Jones makes this point several times: when this chapter of the brotherhood withers away, it will be the death of the brotherhood. And at the end of the play, it is clear that this chapter is finished. Red is not the only Knight to make this point, but L. D., the Knight who has tried the hardest to follow the rules, says finally: "Finished. It's all finished." Red ties their end to the changing times: "Let me tell you somethin', Brother White Knight, Imperial Wizard, you don't put down the sons-of-bitchin' freedom riders and minority bastards with all this crap any more."

Jones' recognition of the effect of time on the Knights allows him to poke fun at the "bumbledick" good-old-boys down at the Cattleman. Indeed his satiric wit cuts deeply. Jones laughs at their childishness: Rufe and Olin argue like children ("did to!" says one, "didn't neither!" says the other). He chuckles at their pretensions: Skip Hampton likes to play the war hero. He roars at their stupidity: the initiation ceremony when Rufe tries to read around the splotch on the sacred book is one of the funniest scenes in contemporary theater. Most of all, he is scathing about their racism.

Despite the fun Jones has at the Knights' expense, he is not totally condemnatory. As before, Jones reveals ambivalence toward his characters. Certainly he ridicules their flaws, but he also demonstrates his compassion toward them. In their ridiculousness they

have embraced an inhumane ideology, but just as they contradict themselves in other ways, they contradict and deny the racism of the brotherhood. Much of their time, in fact, is spent with Ramsey-Eyes Blankenship, the black custodian to whom the colonel entrusts the brotherhood's secret book of rituals, even though they ostensibly believe that book's gospel of segregation.

Jones' ambivalence toward his characters is especially directed toward Colonel Kincaid, who is at once the character most responsible for holding together the racist organization Jones scorns and yet who receives the most sympathetic treatment. The colonel represents the old, simplistic world that valued jingoism and racism. However, unlike the others, whose world is mundane, moribund, and meaningless, the colonel lived when actions were significant, when courageous men on horseback performed heroic deeds.

The point becomes clear when the colonel's condition begins to deteriorate during the initiation. When the colonel begins to recall the events of World War I—events that shattered the coherence of his world and produced the shell-shocked veteran that we see—the tone is caring and sympathetic:

Hangin' on the old bob wire like pieces of pork. Fellers out there with half their guts shot away, sharin' a shell hole with a year-old corpse, out there all night screamin' and cryin' on the old bob wire . . . Ah'm old, ah'm an old man! Ah'm not like ah was. Ah was young then. Ah was young when ah was in France. Ah could be with wimmen. Walkin' down them streets of Bar-le-Duc like some kind of young god, American Doughboy, six foot tall. Oh, God. Oh, mah God.

The contrast between the significant life that the colonel once had and the ridiculous ones the Knights now lead suggests the theme of stasis versus motion, too. What they "do" now is get together in a

deteriorating hotel, play dominoes, and pay homage to a dying organization. At the end of the play when they are convinced that the brotherhood is finished, Rufe complains: "Now, there won't be nothin' to do." Olin answers and points out the stagnation of their outlook, "Aw hell, Rufe, there's always somethin' to do. We could go over there to the new bowlin' alley and give that a try." The power comes from the contrast with the colonel's earlier lament about what happened to his world.

Comparison and contrast, in fact, provide one of Jones' most common devices: the pairing of characters. The colonel's most obvious foil is Skip Hampton whose fabricated war stories contrast with the colonel's. Other pairs are the childish arguers Rufe and Olin, the immature Milo and Lonnie Ray, and L. D. and Red, who are paired through L.D.'s sincere belief in the rules versus Red's cynical disparagement of them.

The most memorable aspect of *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia* is its humor, which is derived in various ways. Some results from Jones' satirically demonstrating the incongruity of frontier values being ritualized by a secret "brotherhood" in the Southwest. The romantic pull of the frontier was toward a sweeping freedom from the limitation that tradition and ritual demand. Not only that, but the Knights represent the worst in tradition: they have ritualized inhumane, racist beliefs and then forgotten the bases and methods of their ceremonies. They have even misplaced the sacred book explaining the initiation.

Another humorous device Jones uses is the type. On the one hand, his characters are drawn from his own life. On the other, they often reflect Jones' theatrical experience very fully. He consciously presents stereotyped characters and situations not only to exaggerate traits he wishes to satirize, but also to get laughs. In fact, most of the characters here are recognizable stock figures: Ramsey-Eyes is

described as a "shuffling shadow," but he often shows that he is smarter than the racists for whom he works; Red Grover, the owner of Red's Bar, is the cynic; Skip Hampton is the town drunk; Milo Crawford is the Mama's boy; Colonel J. C. Kincaid is the shell-shocked veteran whose memory keeps intruding on the present.

The colonel is a good example of Jones' three-pronged use of character: to offer satirical humor, to provide traditional humor, and to demonstrate Jones' ambivalence toward the Southwest. One scene with the colonel shows the stupidity of the kind of generalization that feeds racism. The colonel opposes the new initiate because he is from Silver City: "[P]eople from Silver City are low-down stinkin' cowards and ah flat will not have them around!" When asked why, he explains: "Because in nineteen hundred and eighteen Staff Sergeant George Plummer from right over yonder in Silver City refused to fight, that's why! . . . People from Silver City are no damn good" (p. 37).

For traditional humor Jones presents the colonel's routines as a shell-shocked old vet who is constantly drifting off into stories about his exploits with General Pershing and then asking, "Betcha didn't know that, did ya?" As soon as the initiation moves forward again, the colonel stops the action by sliding off into another tale; the other characters sigh loudly; and the audience, recognizing the byplay, bursts into laughter.

Indeed, they often did when the plays opened. Jones, buoyed by the success of the first two plays, was encouraged to write the third one. Because the audiences had been so responsive to Colonel Kincaid, Jones decided to make him the subject of the third play, *The Oldest Living Graduate*. A chance occurrence provided him with a focus. One evening as he watched KERA, Dallas' public television station, Jones heard a news story about how a private Catholic girls' school was moving to a new location. When the newscaster interviewed the

oldest living graduate of the school, Jones got the basic story and title for the colonel's play.

Despite Jones' admonition that his characters were not based on real people but were "mosaics" of people he knew throughout his life, it is clear that one very large piece of that mosaic was provided by Jones' father. Perhaps it is that connection between Colonel Kincaid and "Jawbone" Jones that explains Jones' compassion for the colonel. Both were military veterans prior to World War I, both were wounded in the war, both were plagued by their injuries. Jones explicitly acknowledged the comparison in "Reflections on a 'Trilogy,'" remarking: "The colonel is a veteran of World War I because my father suffered for many years from the effects of that war."

As the main character in *Graduate*, Colonel Kincaid is more sympathetic than he is in *Knights*. In fact, Jones seems much more sympathetic to the Southwestern value that is important to the colonel in this play: the Southwesterner's reverence for the natural world. The piece of nature at the center of this play is the colonel's property out by Lake Bradleyville. The colonel's son Floyd wants to develop the area and call it "Mumford County Estates," but Colonel Kincaid is committed to keeping it unspoiled. For him it represents an innocent, past time that he would like to recover:

[T]hem foundations up there on that little rise, that's where ah was a young feller in love once. That's why ah don't let anybody fool with that property. Ah like to keep it for rememberin'. That's important to an old feller like me, havin' places that stay the same for rememberin' on.
(p. 271)

Floyd soon discovers that if he has the colonel declared incompetent, he can do what he wishes with the land. He also learns that he can publicize his development at a special ceremony planned to honor his father for being the oldest living graduate of the Mirabeau B.

Lamar Military Academy.

Floyd, however, is not the simple money-grubbing character that he seems to be on the surface, for he does not merely want the land. Rather, he needs his father to give it to him as a sign of his love. Throughout his life Floyd has lived in the shadow of his older brother, Franklin, who died in the crash of a B-17 during a training flight. Floyd has struggled to overcome the significance of his father's memories, including those of his big brother who not only died patriotically but who was an all-star athlete, too. In short, Franklin was everything Floyd was not.

It is through the complex relationship between Colonel Kincaid and Floyd that Jones reveals his ambivalence toward Southwestern values in this play. On the one hand, he seems to endorse the colonel's belief in the significance of the past and the land. One of the passages that Jones was fond of reading aloud during interviews is the colonel's moving speech at the end of the play when he decides to give Floyd the land.

You take that land and build some houses on it. Let folks get some use out of it again. There ain't nuthin' left out there for me nowadays. The things ah seen and remember in this country is all gone now. Even the sounds of things is gone. . . . The creakin' noise the saddles used to make when we went to work of a mornin', men yellin', dogs barkin', horses stompin' and snortin' and fartin' around.

On the other hand, Jones reveals his ambivalence through a clash between two of his predominant themes. First is his primary theme concerning the effect of time on human desire. As the oldest living graduate, the colonel represents the ravages of time. In fact, another of the play's poignant scenes comes when the colonel meets Major Leroy Ketchum and Cadet Whopper Turnbull, the representatives of

the Mirabeau B. Lamar Military Academy. The ceremony honoring him has been something of a lark until he discovers what happened to his schoolmates over the years: several died in World War I, another died years later from injuries suffered in the Argonne Forest, and the last one was killed by the Japanese in World War II. The colonel has attempted to stave off time's effects by holding onto memories, especially those of his early love, Suzette Genet. Like other American writers, notably F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, another work about holding off time's passage, Jones uses an early love to represent an ideal America. For the colonel, the Genet farm is important because it reminds him of his love in a pristine, innocent past. He tells Mike Tremaine, Floyd's hired hand, that he wants to keep the land undeveloped because "that's where ah was a young feller in love once."

The loss of the natural world to a mechanical one is symbolized by the colonel's wheelchair. It is further emphasized by the colonel's plaintive exhortation that Whopper Turnbull avoid the cavalry because horses are no match for artillery: "Them poor horses, them poor, poor horses. Blowed apart right in the traces. . . . Git out of the cavalry, son. You ain't got a chance against heavy artillery and machine guns."

Jones is no doubt sympathetic with the colonel's desire to hold onto the land and the past it represents, but that value butts up against another significant Jones' theme: the dichotomy between stasis and motion. Stasis in these plays generally indicates stagnation. The characters like Lu Ann who want to leave eventually discover that they are condemned to the moribund life where nothing ever happens. Yet the colonel's wish to hold onto the land is a desire for stasis. And in keeping the land because he wants to hold on to memories, he must deny the present and refuse to give his love to his youngest son.

Thus, the scene when the colonel decides to give Floyd the land is an extremely significant one. The colonel has returned from the Knights' meeting, the subject of the other play, where he suffered a stroke. He knows that he is dying, and he calls Floyd to his side and tells him to take the land: "You take that land and build some houses on it. Let folks get some use out of it again. There ain't nuthin' left out there for me nowadays."

This conclusion reconciles the colonel's conflict with Floyd and his own unwillingness to accept the present and has him cast his lot with movement and activity rather than inertia. Nonetheless, Jones' ambivalence remains. The "use" that the land will get is from what Maureen, Floyd's wife, calls "rich and exclusive, sag-bellied, loud-mouthed bores." Jones' heart remains with the colonel's primitivistic desire to hold onto the land, but his head recognizes that the "son-of-a-bitch," time, has its own demands.

Like the other two plays, *The Oldest Living Graduate* is a mixture of the serious and the comic, but this play foregoes the biting satire of *Knights*. Still, Jones uses some of the same humorous devices as before. The colonel's routines continue to be funny. And Maureen is the strong woman, comparable to Lu Ann, who provides the verbal play. One of the most memorable lines in *Graduate*, which Jones acknowledged stealing from an airline pilot, dart-playing friend of his, belongs to Maureen. She tells Clarence Sickenger, Floyd's erstwhile partner in the land development: "You know, Clarence, if bullshit was music, you'd be a by-God brass band."

Despite the strength of the three plays' humor and characterization, they received only mixed reviews from the New York opening. Despite high praise from Harold Clurman, the shows were doomed by Clive Barnes' mediocre reviews in *The New York Times* and by a Sunday *Times* article by Walter Kerr entitled "The Buildup (And Letdown) of 'Texas Trilogy'" (3 October 1976, pp. D3, 10), in which

Kerr criticized Jones for being too dependent on describing rather than dramatizing, for being too faithful to the flatness of West Texas dialect, and for being too theatrically derivative. Kerr wrote:

It is difficult to isolate any one quality in the plays that is incontestably Mr. Jones's own, a quality he might cling to for dear life and elaborate to infinity. . . . [T]he author seems at present a man who has learned to do everything—tidily, efficiently—except to speak up for himself. I wish he would write a play that didn't even look like a play. . . . Rid of other people's habits, he might be forced to a stance and a speech that would identify him beyond doubt. What the present venture suggests is that "regional theater," for all its slight variations of background and tongue, is still taking too many of its cues from Broadway outlines of the past.

The lukewarm reviews of Kerr and others insured the trilogy's closing after only sixty-three performances.

The postmortem was excessive. How could these three plays have received such high praise around the country and then have done so poorly on Broadway? As Kerr's title suggests, one possibility was the buildup. The country was suspicious of excessive public relations campaigns. For example, Bruce Springsteen, the pop singer, had recently suffered a similar case of hype when his picture appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in the same week, only to be damned by music reviewers as unworthy of the praise.

Probably most damaging was the *Saturday Review* cover comparing Jones to Eugene O'Neill. It was an editorial decision disconnected from the article by Bruce Cook, the freelance writer who submitted the piece. He recalls that the editors decided to use the cover and then asked him to work in a reference to O'Neill. He refused; the only O'Neill reference is on the cover while the story

praises Jones' talents reasonably. But the cover's mention of O'Neill misrepresented Jones and may have misled some audience members into believing that Jones' humorous plays would be heavily symbolic ones like O'Neill's.

In his own recounting of the trilogy's history for the *Dramatists Guild Journal* (Winter 1977), Jones rejects the theory that the plays were too regional for New York audiences, but he seems to agree with his wife's assessment that the theater's total environment did not enhance the audiences' response to the plays:

Mary Sue kept saying that the plays had taken over the stage but they hadn't taken over the theater—by that she meant from the cyc[lorama] to the front curb. She noted that the distance between the street and theater seat was really very short. She kept feeling that there should be a sort of “environment lock” that would help separate the cacophony and tempo of the street from the scene on stage.

When the plays were done in Dallas, the DTC lobby included paintings, photographs, and even a mural of West Texas scenes. Country and western music, sometimes by a live band, filled the theater before the plays began each night. In Washington, the music continued. No lobby paintings or photographs were exhibited, but each playgoer received a different introduction. Jones explains:

[T]here was a booklet about the trilogy which had been prepared by the Center's Humanities Program. It was printed on inexpensive stock and distributed free to the members of the audience. It contained a couple of informative articles, descriptions of the townspeople of Bradleyville and a map to the town. My wife noted that it was avidly read by the audience before the curtain went up and during intermissions. She thought that the booklet

had been extremely valuable in helping the audience become involved with the environment of the plays they were seeing.

Others concluded that the plays were not well-received in New York because New York audiences have difficulty with trilogies. During the 1975 Broadway season, they noted, the highly praised *Norman Conquests* had not done well. Had Preston Jones opened on Broadway with a single, previously unheralded play, they said, he no doubt would have been warmly embraced as the next William Inge or Tennessee Williams. After the closing of his plays, Jones also decided that it would have been better to open with only one play for personal reasons: three opening nights in a row are too much for anyone's system to take.

Whatever the reasons for the closing, Jones was apparently able to deal with the disappointment with his characteristic good humor: "Hell, we were the longest running Texas trilogy in history." Nor was he devastated by the experience, as the popular myth suggests. He never planned to become a New York playwright but was committed to staying in Dallas. Jones' friend, Dallas dramatist D. L. Coburn, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Gin Game* was greatly influenced by Jones, commented:

He had his full share of fame and he handled it well. He had his bitter disappointments, and he handled them with the same grace. Throughout the highs and lows of his life as a playwright, he continued to write. And that's the mark of the man. He was a gifted playwright and a dedicated playwright.

Even before the trilogy closed in New York, Jones had moved on to new territory. Commissioned by the American Bicentennial Committee to write a play for the celebration, Jones had begun *A Place on the Magdalena Flats* in 1975. It opened at the Dallas Theater

Center in January 1976 and later was part of the Playmarket '76 offering that spring.

Jones was not satisfied with the original version. Always receptive to suggestions and criticisms from his theater associates and from reviewers, Jones was an inveterate reviser. Often after hearing a line aloud, he would decide to rewrite it. Mainly he responded to his own inner critical voice tuned by his years as an actor. His inner voice, as well as the early reviews, told him that *Magdalena Flats* needed revision. At first it was mainly about an older brother's struggle to survive financially after the 1956 drought hit his New Mexico ranch near Socorro. One early reviewer, James Rosenfield in *Texas Monthly* (August 1976), suggested that Jones shift his emphasis from Carl Grey, the older brother, to the younger one, Frank:

It is Frank who commands both the stage and the world of Magdalena Flats. No character remains indifferent to him; very few conversations exist in which he doesn't intrude; virtually all the dramatic action is prompted by him. Jones had indicated that his play was about Carl; he might be wise to let Carl's chips fall where they may and allow Frank to keep the stage center

Jones responded to the need to rework the play, and he withdrew it from consideration for the Bicentennial celebration so that he would have more time to revise. In fact, he worked on it until shortly before his death. In the final version of the play, revised in July 1979, the play becomes mainly Frank's. No doubt Jones portrayed an especially strong feeling for Frank because Frank and Carl's relationship is apparently based on the one Jones had with his older brother, Jimmy. He often called *Magdalena Flats* his most personal play, and when it was presented in New Mexico, Jimmy's picture was in the program.

Jones' relationship with Jimmy was very important, if not easy, as

the play indicates. Jimmy was twenty-one years older than Preston, a survivor of the Bataan death march, a rancher, and the one who served as Preston's father figure after their father died. Jones described their relation to interviewer Annemarie Marek in 1978 (*Preston Jones: An Interview*, p. 10):

My brother had a great influence on my life. He worked cattle all of his life, and when I got up over, I guess from junior high on, I would work with him. I was never much of a cowboy because I don't like horses, and I tend to fall off them. But I did work for him at the cattle auctions. Then, when I got older, he got me a job there.

In the play, the older brother Carl is a pragmatist who has become his brother's keeper after their drunken mother's death. Frank, like Jones, is not much of a cowboy. He tends to fall off the roan he is supposed to ride. To Carl, Frank is an incompetent fool, an impractical dreamer who likes to read books and wants to go to college for a reason that Carl cannot understand.

This conflict results in the play's climax. While Carl is gone, his wife Charlene, who has mothered Frank throughout the play, begins having her baby. Frank runs for help, but he returns too late; the baby is dead when help arrives. Carl holds Frank responsible, telling him: "You told yourself you was goin' for help. But, actually, you were just runnin' away." Carl then gives Frank some money and tells him he never wants to see him again. Frank takes the money and disappears, leaving Carl and Charlene to continue their struggle on the Magdalena Flats.

With this focus, the play presents the classic East/West duality of much Western American literature. Carl is the pragmatic West-erner battling and revering nature, demanding courage and endurance from others, disparaging education and "culture." Frank is the "Easterner" who places more value on education and culture than

he does on struggles with the natural environment.

Again Jones reveals a deep ambivalence, wavering between criticism of Carl's cold, macho emphasis on hard work and sympathy for his perseverance. Carl does have courage and endurance. Like Jones' brother, Jimmy, Carl survived the Bataan death march, and as the play ends, we are led to believe that he will survive the drought of '56, too.

Frank and Carl's conflict is much like Colonel Kincaid's and Floyd's in *The Oldest Living Graduate* in the sense that characters represent conflicting values. In *Graduate*, however, the colonel, who represents traditional Western values, eventually gives way to Floyd, who mainly wants the land for what it means to him personally.

Just as *A Place on the Magdalena Flats* connects with Jones' other work by portraying his ambivalence toward the Southwest, it also presents his continuing concern with time's effect. Throughout, we are reminded of a falling away from something good, a literal erosion. Carl laments at one point:

I can remember sittin' around the kitchen over to the Sandoval place and listenin' to the oldtimers talk about this country when the native grass was as high as a man's waist. They said you could look out over it and it would move like water. . . . Now the tanks are dried up and the bottoms of 'em are cracked open like scabs on big open sores. My God, how can things change like they do? How can a whole area just kind of give up and turn around until there's nothing left but dust and wind. This was fertile country, a country that a man could work on and live on. Now . . . Jesus.

No redemptive figure appears to save this Magdalena from the destructive nature of time. Carl may endure, but from his wife's point of view, mere endurance is not enough.

Another similarity between this play and the trilogy derives from the use of stock characters for humor. Charlene's friend Patsy Jo Boatright provides much of it, especially in trials with her unmanageable children. But she is also similar to the older Lu Ann. Patsy Jo is the brassy, capable Southwestern woman who says what she thinks to people. After Frank's ex-girlfriend, Mary Helen Kilgore, has lamented Frank's disappearance, Patsy Jo tells her: "You know what, honey, if they had them a carnival attraction for big-mouthed, empty-headed girls ruined by dumbness, I'll jest bet you could be a by-god starrin' attraction!"

One interesting difference between this play and Jones' earlier Texas ones concerns his introduction of subtle imagery. The most vivid images are of wind and dust. By combining them with the title's reference to a biblical character and with the childbirth scene, we can find a subtle interweaving of wasteland images in a world without a visible redeemer.

While the conflict between the Eastern and Western values is unresolved by the main characters, this imagery recalls Jones' criticism of the West for its racism in *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia* and its small town pettiness in *Lu Ann Hampton Laverty Oberlander* and *The Oldest Living Graduate*.

Some of Jones' critics chided him for writing tragicomedies, suggesting that since he could not write one or the other, he had to resort to writing a little of both. Jones was sensitive to these charges, and his next play, *Santa Fe Sunshine*, which opened at the Dallas Theater Center on April 19, 1977, was a broadly humorous play that verges on farce.

The play concerns a Santa Fe artist colony in the spring of 1957. Gino Bruno, a sixty-five-year-old sculptor, is at work on a new piece that he plans to keep secret from his friends until it is finished. His friends include Claude Nordley, a sixty-five-year-old painter, who,

like Red Grover, is a confirmed cynic ("I've alway said that people are no damned good. Now I know it"); Lyman Cotswald, a twenty-four-year-old "beatnik" writer; Liz Watkins, Lyman's folk singer girlfriend; Henrietta Chipping, a gallery owner; and Thurman Vogel, a gay poet.

The plot revolves around Gino's unveiling his new sculpture, his best one since 1944, he is convinced. He tells Claude that it is "absolutely the greatest thing I've ever done." Claude retorts that Gino has the "do or dies," a disease of old artists: "They rattle around for years not really giving a damn and then one hungover morning they wake up, look in the mirror and say to themselves, 'Jesus God, look at me, I'm old, fat, impotent and ugly. I've got to *do* me a masterpiece or *die*.'"

When Gino completes his sculpture, he plans an unveiling party where the drink of choice is a cheap local wine called "Santa Fe Sunshine." Gino invites all his friends; and his would-be agent, Henrietta, brings Gussie Davenport, a rich patron. When the moment for the unveiling arrives, Gino reveals that his masterpiece is a "great, green, warty, plaster frog." It is only through his friends' uproarious laughter that Gino understands his pretensions. In a moment of insight, he decides to sell the frog to the Happy Gila Monster Trading Post where it will be billed as an "Authentic, Pre-historic, Giant, New Mexican Frog."

The play addresses a significant theme: the exploitation of art, the prostitution of artists (the gallery owner's name suggests both a chippy and a chipping away at ideals). But the play never treats the theme seriously because Jones is more concerned with working for the humor than with anything else. Again, he uses some of the familiar devices—stereotyped characters, stock situations, and robust language for humor. Claude, for example, says:

I've painted with pastels, I've painted with Sears and

Roebuck interior latex. I even tried painting with adobe once but the damn stuff kept drying out and falling off the canvas, and every one of them were masterpieces. Hell, I'd even paint in fresh cow shit if it came in more than one color.

While some of the gags and lines are funny, too many of them depend on overworked stereotypes. Thurman, for example, is the sweet homosexual who enters Gino's and says: "Look at all the pretty ribbons and luminaries and a Popeye pinata. How cute." Later, Lyman says to him: "Butt out, Faggidy Ann!" And Hendry Anaya, Gino's maid's son, is a "thieving Mexican." Gussie Davenport, the "patron of the arts," is a tough old broad who is just looking for ways to spend her ex-husband's money.

Played broadly, the play is good for a few laughs, but it contributes little to Southwestern drama. Jones admitted that it was not a significant work. When Annemarie Marek asked if he had ever done anything "non-serious" as a playwright, Jones replied: "*Santa Fe Sunshine*."

The play was not particularly well-received either. It took Jones some time to convince Baker to present it in Dallas. While John Neville, *The Dallas Morning News* reviewer, offered some mild praise, W. L. Taitte from *Texas Monthly* was not as kind, saying that Jones had "to work hard to wring laughs out of beatniks and folk-singers, and *Santa Fe Sunshine* suffers from the strain." John Bloom of *The Dallas Times Herald* labeled it a "frivolous patchwork of gags, stereotypes and situation-comedy humor."

More than anything else probably, *Santa Fe Sunshine* provided Jones with the vehicle to continue writing after the disappointment of New York. Also its low comedic approach, in contrast to the tragic-comedy of the trilogy, allowed him to feel that he could write with greater variety: "I will not adhere to one kind of playwrighting. Hell, I

might write a children's play next, or a fantasy."

His next play, however, returned to small-town Texas racism. In 1978 the Actors' Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, asked Jones and several other playwrights to contribute one-act plays about American holidays. The plays were first performed at the Actors' Theatre for two weeks in February 1979. Then they were presented by the Public Broadcasting System's "Earplay" series with the collective title, "Holidays."

Jones chose the distinctly Texas holiday called "Juneteenth" for the subject and title of his play. Texas blacks celebrate June 19, 1865, as Emancipation Day because on that day Major General Gordon Granger of the Union Army entered Galveston, Texas, and declared: "In accordance with a proclamation from the executive of the United States, all slaves are free." When Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, Texans paid allegiance to Jefferson Davis as president of the Confederacy and ignored Lincoln's order.

Jones' play is set in the town cafe, not in Bradleyville, but in another fictitious West Texas town: Ferd. As the play opens, Mayor Ferd (the town is run by Ferd's) enters and complains to Betty Lou, the waitress, that because of the Juneteenth celebration in the city park the next day, the white citizens will be without city and household services.

In scene two George Lewis, who seems to be based on Jones, enters. He has recently moved to Ferd from Santa Fe, married a local girl, and taken a job for the Texas Highway Department. After digging at George for having to take orders from his new black supervisor, Harvey Blankenship, Mayor Ferd then takes advantage of George's ignorance of Texas history and leads him to believe that he will get a holiday on June 19th because it is "Freedom Day."

In scene three the supervisor, Blankenship, enters looking for

George. "You're the boy they sent from Austin," the mayor remarks. Soon George understands the joke the mayor has pulled on him. Just before George and Blankenship leave, the mayor begins politicking for his nephew Bubba, the local state representative. Mayor Ferd asks Blankenship if Bubba can speak at the Juneteenth celebration. Getting the last laugh, the black supervisor replies that it would be impossible: "Everybody in town knows that's his afternoon to watch Sesame Street."

"Juneteenth" is a light return to the concerns of the trilogy. It is especially reminiscent of *The Last Meeting of the Knights of the White Magnolia* in its biting satire directed against racism. Mayor Ferd is the embodiment of all small-town Texas racists. He not only demonstrates an irrational fear about blacks, but he also exhibits general ignorance. As the play opens, he does not recognize the picture of Robert Redford on Betty Lou's magazine, nor does he understand Blankenship's last comment because he does not know what Sesame Street is.

This satire is the main purpose of the play. There is little ambiguity and only passing reference to Jones' usual theme of time. The humor does, however, derive from Jones' use of stereotyping and regional dialect. All in all, neither "Juneteenth" nor *Santa Fe Sunshine* exhibits any advancement in Jones' talent.

If those two plays demonstrate little progress in Jones' work, his last play, *Remember*, certainly does. *Texas Monthly* critic Taitte, who had watched Jones' development throughout the 1970s, reviewed *Remember* after it opened at the Dallas Theater Center in May 1979 and wrote: "*Remember* is his most ambitious, most carefully crafted, and richest drama." And of Adrian, the main character, Taitte commented: "Adrian [is] the most complete and the most challenging character Jones has yet imagined."

Not only does *Remember* represent an advance in characterization

for Jones, but it introduces new themes, new subject matter, and new theatrical techniques. It is also the first Jones' play that does not have a clearly identified setting such as Bradleyville or Magdalena Flats. Rather, the notes state that the "play opens in a typical Holiday Inn-type motel room in a western American state."

Clearly, though, *Remember* is another New Mexico play. In the *Talking with Texas Writers'* interview, Jones explained to Patrick Bennett what prompted the play and identified its setting as New Mexico:

I was in Santa Fe with a play of mine, and a whole bunch of friends got together, ex-fraternity buddies I hadn't seen in a while. . . . It got me thinking . . . about the play then.

I decided for my lead to use an actor who was coming back to town, in order to use some of my experiences there. He runs into an old girl friend who happens to be in Santa Fe who is married to somebody else now. (p. 164)

In its final form the setting is Albuquerque, although it is never specifically identified.

Adrian Blair returns to his hometown for the first time in twenty years when his traveling dinner theater company ("*The Milk Man's Last Fling—A Rib-Cracking New Comedy* by C. C. Milford") is scheduled to play there. Adrian, now a second-rate actor, arrives, coincidentally, on his fortieth birthday. Although he has avoided returning home (he even missed his mother's funeral), the circumstances lead him to begin examining his past. Rosealee, his girl-friend—"roommate," convinces him to call George Archer, his best friend at the Catholic boy's school they attended. He finds George listed in the phone book under "lawyers," and when Adrian calls, George agrees to come over for a drink. As they wait for George to arrive, Adrian, in a reminiscent mood, tells Rosealee of his first love

in poetic language that demonstrates another advance for Jones:

It was lunacy, wonderful, wonderful lunacy. It was carnation and spiked punch time, honey, music by the local string band, colored lights on the ceiling and crepe paper festoons. Young gentlemen and puffy dressed dates trying vainly to dance cheek to cheek. . . . But somehow we managed to fall in love. . . . We would be married right after graduation and enter a world completely of our own making. . . . We would be Indian dancers, dust our legs with butterfly wings and waltz through life like children in a picture book.

Unfortunately, he and that first love, Jane, had broken up when she decided that "the bonds of matrimony were going to be forged out of iron, not butterfly dust."

Adrian also recalls the days at St. Mike's with his prefect, Brother Anthony, a man all the boys revered because he represented the absolutism of their boys' school world: "[I]f you stepped out of line too far, *wham*, the long black arm of the Christian brotherhood would descend like God's own lightning."

Adrian's attitudes have changed, and soon he discovers many other alterations from the way things used to be. Shortly after George arrives, there is another knock. George had invited their old prefect to join them. Now, though, "Brother Anthony" is Dan Murphy; he has given up the church and has become one of the town's leading real estate brokers. That, however, is not the only surprise for Adrian; he also learns that George is married to Jane, Adrian's first love.

Before the play ends, Adrian breaks up with Rosealee, argues with Dan and George about religion, and after they have gone, laments with Jane (who has come looking for George) what time has done to their dreams: "Old friends, old places, old memories fade away like breath on a glass."

The religious references in *Remember* introduce a theme explicitly that had only been suggested in previous plays: Jones' concern with religion. In a posthumous remembrance of his friendship with Jones, Dallas writer Ole Anthony recalls how they spent long nights arguing about religion and how Jones would often rail against him for the "absurdity of my religious beliefs." He quotes Jones as saying, "God-dammit, God just isn't fair—if there is a God" (*Texas Monthly*, December 1979, pp. 180, 184).

In previous plays Jones had just touched upon a religious theme: no redeemer seems possible for Magdalena Flats, and the colonel's fear of death's finality in *The Oldest Living Graduate* counters the traditional Christian embrace of a glorious afterlife. But in *Remember*, religious questions are central to the play, and by posing them, Jones moved into a new realm. Reduced by New York critics to a mildly amusing regional writer with a good ear for comic dialogue but no ideas, Jones pushed *Remember* to present a man whose ideals and religious beliefs have rotted with time. Jones' earlier plays, of course, had been concerned with the effect of time, but the theme was always presented with a distinctly regional flavor. In *Remember*, although its Albuquerque setting is recognizable, the theme clearly transcends the setting.

Adrian's religious angst seems to stem from having lost the earlier times when his religion comforted him:

You know, sometimes, there in church during mass, with the priest and the incense and all, I could feel this presence, this pressure in the air. During Eastertime, the monks would come up and sing the Gregorian and I would sit there mesmerized . . . each sense was stimulated. The feel of the beads in my hand, the chanting, the incense, the little, light ringing bells . . . the mass, that wonderful, singsong music of the mass. There was nothing like it in

the world. . . . The mass going thump, thump in my ears like a deep machine, thump, thump, boom, boom. (Pause) But like everything else in my life, I quit listening to it.

By merging his usual theme of time with religious questions Jones expanded his subject matter and altered his humorous techniques as well. Much of the humor in this play comes through Adrian's recalling the religion he and George had created at St. Mike's: Frankology, based on the teachings of Jesus' older brother, Frank Christ. They recall their religious parody, telling how Frank was too fat to ride a donkey, had only six rented disciples, spent his time hiding in an olive oil urn. When Jesus was crucified, the Romans tried to put Frank on a cross, too, but he was too greasy to stay. As a result the Romans buried him in an olive grove: "And every true Frankologist knows that the day of resurrection is not Easter Sunday at all, but Arbor Day."

Jones does not abandon all of his previous themes and techniques in *Remember*. He is still concerned with time's effect, and he again uses a strong female character to provide humorous statements. Although Rosealee is not from the Southwest, she is similar to Maureen, Lu Ann, and Patsy Jo Boatwright, in her use of vigorous, sometimes off-color language. She says to Adrian: "I'll swear, sometimes for you, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line of bullshit." And when Adrian recalls how girls in the 1950s wore thirty-seven petticoats under their formals, Rosealee comments: "Who the hell were you going with, Scarlett O'Hara? That damned thing sounds more like a cotton bale than a formal."

With the initial success of *Remember* Preston Jones' writing career seemed to be back on track after the difficulties with the trilogy on Broadway and the mediocre reception of *Santa Fe Sunshine*. Meanwhile, Jones continued to act. He was the Sheriff in Mark Medoff's

Firekeeper during the 1978 season. In September 1979 Jones was in rehearsal as the Duke of Norfolk in *A Man for All Seasons*, directed by his wife, Mary Sue. Awakened the night of September 9 with stomach trouble, he was taken to St. Paul's Hospital in Dallas where he underwent two operations. His condition was not considered critical, but at 1:45 p.m. on September 19, 1979, Preston Jones died. His death was attributed to complications from surgery for bleeding ulcers.

It was particularly ironic that Preston Jones died so suddenly and so young, for his continuing theme concerned the impermanence of life and the effect of time on human aspirations. Jones had once said that he wanted to leave a significant body of work, and most people who followed his work believed that after *Remember*, Jones' work would have been substantially different from his earlier plays.

The work he left reveals various influences. His personal experiences, as I have noted, were extremely important. Besides his family and his Colorado City friends, his work with Paul Baker at the Dallas Theater Center provided the initial stimulus. Baker believed that each member of the company could grow creatively only by developing as many faculties as possible and performing many theater tasks. He asked that they act, direct, design, provide technical assistance, and so on, while working toward what he called in a book title, the *Integration of Abilities*. Because Jones embraced this theory, it was not unusual for him to expand his other talents before returning to writing after a seven-year hiatus.

Besides the personal influences, Jones was also affected by his theatrical experience. He identified for Patrick Bennett the playwrights that were most important to him:

The greatest was Thornton Wilder of *Our Town*. Oh boy, anybody who could write a play as good as that! I was in it; it just tore me to pieces. . . . Then there was Arthur

Miller's *The Price* which I think is a beautifully done play. In fact, whenever I get bogged down, or messed up, or discouraged, then I go back to read it, not to steal anything, but just to see the beautiful way he sets things up.

Another play that Jones identified as a significant influence was Calderón de la Barca's *Life Is a Dream*. He explained that he had once presented a speech on time to a class and referred to de la Barca's play in it. He continued:

Being a Catholic—I have a Catholic background—I was always fascinated and skeptical and awestruck at the same time about mysteries. Perhaps that's why you have so many Catholic and Jewish writers: the religion is such a structure that you start pondering this and then you find yourself pondering the whole human experience.

The mystery of time provides the main idea for *Life Is a Dream* and, of course, for most of Jones' plays.

He was also influenced by Texas writers. He told Bennett that he admired John Graves, A. C. Greene, Winston Estes (especially his *A Streetful of People*), Eugene McKinney, Robert Flynn, and Larry McMurtry. Flynn, like McKinney and Baker, was a faculty member at Trinity when Jones studied there. Flynn's *North to Yesterday* seems to have been an important influence on Jones' use of humor.

Of all these Texas writers Jones seems closest in outlook to McMurtry in his early work. There are some clear parallels between McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* and Jones' *The Oldest Living Graduate*: both have an ambivalent attitude toward the passing of the old values, both use a dying old man to represent the old, passing way of life, both old men have a son waiting to take over.

Both McMurtry and Jones belong to the generation of Southwesterners who grew up at the tag end of the old, rural life that has been glorified as the golden time of the Southwest. Both men worked on

ranches when they were young. Both men wrote about the passing of that world with a mixture of sadness and delight. And, finally, both men began moving away from that old world. Beginning with *Moving On*, his first urban novel, McMurtry almost completely cut himself off from the old. In his last work, Jones had set out for new territory.

A few days after Jones died, *The Washington Post* printed a letter written by Ann Robson, a Fort Washington, Maryland, mother of two. She told about taking her sons to see *The Oldest Living Graduate* at the Kennedy Center despite their vigorous protests. After the play, they had been completely won over by it. She continued:

If Preston Jones could move two reluctant teenagers to perceive humor and pathos and glory, too, in the human condition in a setting far removed by time, locale, and character from their own experience, what he has written will endure.

Even though he shouldn't have needed me to tell him so, I wish I had.

It is an appropriate tribute to Preston Jones' work. What he has written will endure for the reasons Mrs. Robson identified: Jones' acute sensibility about the human condition presented in humorous, lively, audience-centered plays. The work he left is not the work of an O'Neill or a Tennessee Williams. It is closer to a William Inge or a Thornton Wilder with its warmly human feeling for the ordinariness of small-town life. In the final analysis, Jones will probably be remembered more for what he represented than for what he wrote. His *A Texas Trilogy* plays well, reaching beyond regionalism through theme and character while remaining deeply rooted in the Southwest. *Remember* suggests that if he had lived, he would probably have contributed a significant body of work for American theater. As it is, he will be remembered as one of the first post-World

War II American dramatists to break New York's hold on American theater. He achieved a national reputation, even an international one, and he did it despite, not through, New York.

"Betcha didn't know that, did ya?"

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