

## Review

# Tickle Yourself Pink with Steel Magnolias

By: **Chad Young**, Managing Editor, *Nashville Parent*

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I have always loved *Steel Magnolias* more than my luggage, and for months I have eagerly awaited Tennessee Repertory Theatre's production of this opening show of its silver anniversary season. I figured the Rep would do a really great job with this one, and I'm happy to report that it exceeded my expectations on all counts!

Many folks are familiar with the movie that features a stellar cast, including Sally Field, Julia Roberts, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Olympia Dukakis and Daryl Hannah, but before it became a movie, it was a stage play. While I adore the movie, I prefer the stage version. To me, the comedy and drama are much more powerful on stage with everything happening in the southern comfort of a Louisiana beauty shop.

Speaking of a stellar cast, the Rep pulled together an undeniable all-star cadre of leading ladies in our local theater community. Each of them have a lot of history with the company, namely Mary Jane Harvill (M'Lynn), who was a founding member of Tennessee Rep 25 years ago. If you're a true Rep fan, you'll recognize the rest of the cast as well, which includes Martha Wilkinson (*Truvy*), Brooke Bryant (*Annelle*), Ruth Cordell (*Clairee*), Denice Hicks (*Ouiser*) and Marin Miller (*Shelby*).

Ms. Miller's return to the Rep stage is triumphant (she left Nashville a year ago to pursue her talent in New York). It's a lot of fun to see her grace our local stage again, and what she brings to her role as Shelby is delightfully sweet and charming. She endears the audience to her character's quest to enjoy the wonderful world of parenthood, despite the risks and ultimate tragic consequence that come with it.

What's really special about the casting in this production is that Ms. Harvill and Ms. Miller are real life mother and daughter — and their organic chemistry truly transcends to the stage, bringing a flood of believable emotion to the rub between their characters in the show's story arc. Together, they cast a wide realm of stage magic that powerfully pulls the audience into the drama.

Ms. Harvill delivers an incredible performance along the way, but her standout moment is her ultimate meltdown in the beauty shop after Shelby's death. It is emotionally gripping and real, with succinct grit that provokes the audience to tap into the painful depths of unthinkable loss. In a show that is filled with a huge amount of laughs, it takes a masterful talent to take the audience from a comedic high to a big drop on the proverbial roller coaster ride of emotions. Ms.

Harvill succeeds in doing so in a delicate manner before thrusting the audience into the full-force, eventual flip.

The accompanying cast members each give truly terrific performances. Ms. Bryant gives an appropriate amount of sheepish hesitance to Annelle while growing her character into her place among the wise-mouth women. Ms. Wilkinson is fun as gossip-queen, beauty-shop owner Truvy. It's hilarious watching her tease Shelby's hair to high heaven and all the while grasp her warm, centerpiece role.

Ms. Cordell breathes much vim and vigor into one of the show's most beloved characters, Clairee. Miss Clairee is the hysterical, reigning queen of smart-alecks, and Cordell deftly captures her character's genteel southern charm with the exact amount of witty bite.

The funniest character in the show is the cantankerous, crotchety, old Ouiser Boudreaux, and Ms. Hicks plays Ouiser to the hilt! Hicks nails the bull's eye. Every line, every mannerism, every quirk ... can't say enough about how fabulous she is in this role. Hicks, along with Cordell, supply a great amount of laughs, strategically placed to lighten the mood in Robert Harling's brilliant script.

All of these wonderful actresses come together to give their audience a tremendous theatrical experience. *Steel Magnolias* is peppered with some of the greatest one-liner quips in theater history, and each one of the fine ladies in the cast delivers them in superb fashion.

Director Rene Copeland, along with her cast and crew, gives Nashville a real gem with *Steel Magnolias*. I can't wait to watch the rest of the Rep's season unfold!

Personally, with this production, I'm tickled pink, even if it comes in shades of blush and bashful!