

Review

'Steel Magnolias' opens Tennessee Repertory Theatre's 25th Anniversary Season

By: **Jeffrey Ellis**, *Broadway World*

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Six of Nashville's finest actresses are conducting a master class of sorts at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center this month and it's open to the public through October 24. The occasion is the opening production of Tennessee Repertory Theatre's 25th anniversary season and the vehicle is Robert Harling's beloved *Steel Magnolias*, the now iconic tale of Southern women, their immeasurable strengths, their fiery grace and their unique brand of affectionate, sometimes biting, humor.

Directed by Tennessee Rep's singularly accomplished producing artistic director Rene Dunshee Copeland, this fine production is so much more than a mere revival of the company's 1989 production, although it once again stars Mary Jane Harvill in the role of M'Lynn. This staging is perhaps most newsworthy because it pairs Harvill onstage for the first time with her daughter, Marin Miller, who plays the doomed Shelby in *Steel Magnolias*. As the launch of this silver anniversary season, perhaps no one could come up with a more apropos project: Harvill was one of the founding actors of the company in the mid-1980s, while Miller has left her own sizable imprint on the company in more recent years. Copeland is to be commended for her decision to cast the mother-and-daughter team and for her lovingly felt and richly etched production.

For those audience members whose only knowledge of the piece comes from the film version that starred Nashville's own Dolly Parton (along with Sally Field, Olympia Dukakis, Shirley McClain, Daryl Hannah and Julia Roberts in her first Oscar-nominated role), the original play may be something of a revelation. Free from the cinematic demands to open up the story and paint the tale on a broader canvas, playwright Harling instead narrowed the focus on the intimate and universal tale of the shared friendship and very real sense of familial devotion made so genuinely human by his six richly drawn characters.

The six women are seen on four different Saturday mornings, gathered at Truvy's Beauty Spot in Chinquapin Parish, Louisiana, for some uniquely Southern bonding rituals that typify life in the small-town South. We are allowed to view their interactions, like so many flies on the wall, and to witness their uncommon, yet very down-to-earth and so true to life, connections to one another. It's sentimental, but not overly so, and Harling writes his beauty parlor repartee with such honesty that he is able to skirt stereotypes (both regional and gender-based) so skillfully and unerringly that you know for a fact he really knows these women in his heart and in his mind.

Harling's lovingly crafted script is brought vividly to life by Copeland's heartfelt direction—it's clear, too, that she knows whereof she speaks (well, directs). By bringing these six women together to do what they do best, she breathes new life into this warhorse of a play that has become a cash cow for theatre groups around the country, but perhaps more so in the South than anywhere else. Copeland hasn't necessarily re-

imagined the piece, but instead has intelligently allowed the script to speak for itself and has remained faithful to the original to great effect.

Harvill, who played M'Lynn in 1989, is much better suited to the role now age-wise, and her life's experiences provide the necessary emotional heft and foundation for her character's emotional arc in the two-act play. Her Act Two monologue, in which she rails against God and the uncertainty of life in response to her daughter's untimely death, is particularly poignant and heart-rending. Harvill's presence on the Nashville stage has been sorely missed these past years and her performance in *Steel Magnolias* only magnifies the desire to see her onstage more often.

As Shelby, a character often played to maudlin excess, in a pitch-perfect performance Miller plays her exquisitely. Her Shelby has the appropriate sharpness beneath the sweetness, thus providing a much-needed counterpoint that allows the character to be more relatable and, frankly, more believable. Miller's Shelby is no saint, but rather a flesh-and-blood portrayal with whom anyone could identify

In addition to Harvill and Miller, Copeland has cast four other superb actresses in the play and, quite honestly, I have a feeling that playwright Harling would have a hard time imagining any actress delivering his trademark quips and bon mots more effectively or more convincingly than Martha Wilkinson as Truvy. Entrusted with some of Harling's best one-liners and most memorable quotes that are now etched in our Southern lexicon (and every gay man's book of outrageous quotes), Wilkinson delivers the goods in her own heartbreakingly real way that is refreshingly free from stagy artifice.

Cast as Clairee, the elegantly beautiful Ruth Cordell has an ease of delivery and a grace of movement that typifies the Southern matron in all her glory. However, Cordell's portrayal lacks any staginess, relying instead on her own innate style to bring Clairee to life, at turns both laugh-out-loud funny and movingly dramatic.

Brooke Bryant's Annelle is the very picture of restraint, which saves the naïve character from becoming a cliché. Instead, Bryant's Annelle is believable and likable, possessing an innocent charm that allows the audience to accept her own emotional arc in the play as real growth.

But, clearly, if anyone in the cast threatens to steal the show from her capable castmates, it's Denice Hicks as the neighborhood harridan Ouiser Boudreaux, who can do it. One of the region's most respected stage actresses (and directors--she's also artistic director for the Nashville Shakespeare Festival), Hicks' performance is revelatory in its scope--a good thirty years younger than the character she plays, she becomes every Southern town's rich, eccentric, old lady whose harshly frank exterior belies her heart of gold. Hicks' confidence is extraordinary and while she does not (in any sense) steal focus from any of the other women onstage, she gives a master class in character acting that is not to be missed.

While Copeland's direction is exemplary and the actresses are at the top of their game, the production is not without its problems, that in retrospect seem like minor quibbles. Act One seemed to move slowly (perhaps because of the interminable welcoming speech before the play's start that will hopefully be shortened during subsequent performances), while Act Two hit the right rhythm and clipped along at a good pace.

Trish Clark's costume design, while quite good, also needs fine-tuning. What's with Clairee's white belt/taupe pumps combo in Act Two (something no self-respecting Southern woman would be caught dead in) and Shelby's dowdy duds throughout the show? Although the costumes are very true to the play's setting in the mid-1980s, they're not nearly as fashionable as women such as these would wear.

Gary Hoff's beautifully designed and expertly realized set (with kudos to Michael Barnett's lighting design) provides a lovely playing area for these actresses to conduct their exceptional master class. Even if you've seen dozens of stagings of *Steel Magnolias* (as I have) or watched the film over and over (as I must admit, I have), you'll find so much new to love and to appreciate in Tennessee Rep's silver anniversary mounting.