

Review

Though a tad syrupy, the Rep's latest will warm your cockles

By: **Martin Brady**, *Nashville Scene*

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You'd have to be pretty curmudgeonly not to enjoy Tennessee Rep's new production of *Steel Magnolias*, Robert Harling's tribute to small-town Southern sisterhood. Yes, it's a sentimental ol' thing, laced with its share of strategic sappiness, and there are moments when all that female supportiveness threatens to raise the audience's blood sugar to the same dangerous levels that eventually conspire to hasten the demise of the ill-fated central figure, Shelby. But otherwise, this paean of praise to good-natured gossip and the bonds of friendship is successfully mounted under the direction of Rene Copeland.

Chinquapin, La., is home to Truvy Jones' hair salon, a setting charmingly brought to life by designer Gary Hoff. Here six ladies gather with regularity, sharing life experiences, down-to-earth wisdom and gentle ribbing, their mutual respect and affection obvious if not always directly expressed. The time frame covers about two years, with the main events revolving around the ladies' concern for the sickly but ever optimistic Shelby's marriage, and her decision to have a child against doctor's orders.

There might be one too many PMS jokes in Harling's script, which also depicts the offstage men as either "sofa slugs" or gun-totin' good ol' boys, and nips familiarly at Christian culture. But there are big laughs too, courtesy of a generally outstanding cast led by Martha Wilkinson, the hairdresser with a heart of gold. Solid one-liners abound from all quarters, though Denice Hicks steals the show as Ouiser Boudreaux, the crusty, judgmental biddy who seemingly trusts no one (but loves everyone). Ruth Cordell is the wealthy matron Clairee and Brooke Bryant is the young hairdresser Annelle, and both offer fine character work.

The real-life mother-daughter team of Marin Miller and Mary Jane Harvill are Shelby and her worry-wart mother M'Lynn (Julia Roberts and Sally Field for those who saw the movie). Their portrayals are acceptably by-the-book, though the usually excellent Miller seems less than completely comfortable in the role of a vulnerable but courageous Southern belle, and Harvill's final speech—the big tearjerker designed to make us cherish life itself—is disappointingly delivered.

But for all the obvious—and consistently well-wrought—humor, it's the brief, tender moments that are at the core of *Steel Magnolias'* appeal, and this production provides a heartwarming opener for the Rep's 25th anniversary season.