

## Review

# Tennessee Rep's 'Steel Magnolias' will steal your heart

By: **Evans Donnell**, *The Tennessean*

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Tennessee Repertory Theatre's *Steel Magnolias* is more than a wonderful walk down memory lane, although it's certainly that. This revival production is a strong live performance by fine actors.

The troupe kicks off its 25th anniversary season in style with Robert Harling's 1987 play, which was largely based on his own family experiences. Tennessee Rep had a terrific production of that play during its 1989-90 season, and many know its story through a star-filled 1989 film with a cast led by Sally Field and a young Julia Roberts.

This reviewer has long preferred the play to the film for one reason: We don't see the men in these women's lives, as we do in the movie. In the play, we just hear about them, which allows the female characters to stoke our imaginations with their descriptions.

A disclosure is appropriate: I participated in Tennessee Rep's now-defunct professional actor training program when Mary Jane Harvill, who has returned to play M'Lynn in this production, headed it. She was my mentor and friend and I developed a permanent admiration and affection for her as a result of our time together.

That said I still marveled at her opening-night performance. Years may have passed, but I got to know her well during that training program, and saw her perform in the company's first production of *Steel Magnolias* and other shows. I didn't see Harvill on that stage. I didn't even see too many echoes of her excellent prior performance. All that could be seen on opening night was a fully fleshed character. That's what a good actor does.

Harvill's real-life daughter, Marin Miller, is her offspring in the play as well. Miller's Shelby is just the right mix of youthful optimism and brashness, and her interactions with the grounded, protective M'Lynn show a chemistry that could spring from the natural bond between mother and daughter. But, like Harvill, Miller still gives us a character apart from her own personality, behavior and mannerisms.

The rest of the cast is a delight as well. Brooke Bryant's Annelle makes some noticeable transitions during the tale, and Bryant handled those smoothly and truthfully. Ruth Cordell's Clairee was every inch the Southern lady, with the perfect sense of self, place and timing that such ladies have; and Martha Wilkinson's Truvy was the warm and world-wise hairdresser in whom anyone would wish to confide.

Last, but certainly not least, was Denice Hicks as Ouiser. She delivered Harling's clever lines with a freshness and sharpness that made her character achingly funny. It was also interesting to see this youthful woman in the middle years of life playing a much older person. Her posture, walk and other traits made her transformation into someone several years her senior believable.

Once again, the production elements for Tennessee Rep are solid. Gary C. Hoff's set, complete with such wry touches as garden gnomes outside the carport-turned-hair salon, gives us what we need to know about place and time. Trish Clark clothes the characters in appropriate 1980s garb, and Michael Barnett's lighting frames without intruding into the Louisiana-of-not-so-long-ago we're asked to enter.

Producing Artistic Director René D. Copeland has led her company into its silver anniversary with a winning revival of one of Tennessee Rep's most memorable productions. But this is, thankfully, not theater-as-museum. The actors who bring *Steel Magnolias* to life again give theatergoers what they need today and tomorrow – living art that entertains and engages.