

Steel Magnolias at A.D. Players Will Tug at Your Heartstrings

[D. L. Groover](#) January 29, 2024 6:50AM



Steel Magnolias at A.D. Players Photo by Miranda Zaebst

If you're a sucker for Hallmark cards with a Southern drawl, or you like your entertainment redolent with clouds of hairspray – but slathered with a backwater accent that could melt buttah – then I have a play for you. You must have guessed: that popular, crowd-pleasing, chick-play deluxe, Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*. The A.D. Players' production, directed by Leslie Swackhamer, gives this lard-fried comedy/drama the sheen of a badly painted paint-by-numbers.

Built to be audience friendly in extremis, the play is shameless in its manipulation. We quickly fall for these six Louisiana curler cuties as they bitch, sass, prop each other up when down, and spew wise cracks and epigrams in an ungodly mix of Eudora Welty and grade-B Oscar Wilde. They don't change over time, or even want to get from A to B.

The only real action in the play is what's going to happen to pretty-in-pink Shelby? Will she get married, get pregnant, have the baby? And what about that nasty kidney dialysis? All the while, the interlocking friends – and one new one, the scared rabbit Annelle – continue their hand holding at Truvy's garage beauty parlor over a span of three years, and we know them no better at the end of the play than we do at their first entrance. It's all surface: AquaNet, leopard print, and a gentle nudge toward the nascent women's movement.

The play debuted off-Broadway in 1987 and had a successful run until 1990. The Herbert Ross film version (1989) starred Sally Field, Olympia Dukakis, Shirley MacLaine, Julia Roberts (Oscar nominated), Dolly Parton,

and Daryl Hannah, and was opened up – or padded – with the men's characters who are only talked and bitched about in the play. In 2005, a Broadway run briefly appeared, but the play has had, nonetheless, quite a profitable career in regional theater ever since, mostly due to the success of the movie.

For all its female empowerment memes, the play lacks depth, but Harling has certainly written six juicy, if insubstantial, roles; and the actors at A.D. Players try their best to squeeze life into them. But like a hair dryer on overdrive, it short circuits as a period piece.

Kristin E. Ellis (town gossip Truvy) is Tabasco outside, but toasty marshmallow inside. Laurel Burrer (born-again Annelle) should skitter like a cricket on a skillet but doesn't quite find the right balance. Somehow she's not odd enough. Theresa Nelson (Clairee, the former first lady of Chinquapin Parish, Louisiana), one of Houston theater's veteran pros, exudes patrician sass when not stumbling over her lines.

Alice M. Gatling (Shelby's control freak mother M'Lynn) is tightly wound until her magnificent Act II meltdown, which is a joy to experience. Shenyse Harris (Shelby) twinkles bravely while the life force drains out of her. Deborah Hope (the cantankerous Ouiser, and our Houston Theater Best Actress award-winner last season for *August: Osage County*) sparkles in this supporting role and has one hell of a time playing this wickedly funny biddy.

The delightfully tacky, thick production design by Kirk A. Domer (sets), Samantha Dante (costumes), and Sharon Ranson (wigs) depicts these southern cracked-belles better than the playwright. You'll laugh, you'll cry, then laugh again. Then wonder why it affected you so. I guess I just wasn't in the mood for this Southern comfort. It happens.

Steel Magnolias continues through February 18 at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Sundays at A.D. Players at The George Theater, 5420 Westheimer. For more information, call 713-526-2721 or visit adplayers.org. \$23-\$71.



D.L. Groover has contributed to countless reputable publications including the *Houston Press* since 2003. His theater criticism has earned him a national award from the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN) as well as three statewide Lone Star Press Awards for the same. He's co-author of the irreverent appreciation, *Skeletons from the Opera Closet* (St. Martin's Press), now in its fourth printing.

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