

From Bob Bows

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Steel Magnolias

As the program guide for this stellar production tells us, friends are indispensable; as we see in the play, this wisdom is indisputable. In good times and bad, friends are there to share our elation and lend support when we totter from life's blows.

This holds true no matter where we live, though in small towns, such as we visit here in Chinquapin, a fictional Northwestern Louisiana parish, it is particularly evident, given that everyone knows everything about everybody.



(L to R) Rhonda Brown as Truvy and Patty Figel as Clairee
Photo: Michael Ensminger

Six women regularly gather at the beauty shop run by Truvy (Rhonda Brown), to catch up on the latest gossip, share memories, and empathize with each other's trials.

Brown, like her fellow Tennessean and girlhood idol, Dolly Parton (who played the role in the film), is the hostess with the mostest, as she welcomes each character into her salon. They return because Truvy makes them feel right at home, even when they are at odds with one another or at odds within themselves. Brown's easy going Southern dialect and manner invites us in as well, where we witness the various stages of

the art of hairstyling and manicure as well as a potpourri of female bonding. Of course, humor is the glue here, and Truvy leads the way in zingers, Brown timing each punch line



(L to R) Devon James as Annelle,
Patty Figel as Clairee,
and Billie McBride as Ouizer
Photo: Michael Ensminger

with aplomb.

Part preacher, part referee, Truvy sets the boundaries for the sharp repartee between Ouizer (Billie McBride) and Clairee (Patty Figel). This is a delicious sub-plot, with the curmudgeonly Ouizer kvetching over life's annoying details while Clairee chides her pessimism at every turn. McBride is as dry as a vodka martini sans vermouth, with a deadpan the likes of which Buster Keaton would be proud, bringing a surfeit of hilarity when played off Figel's eternal optimism and ever-present wide smile.

If this sounds like an outsider would feel like they're walking on eggs when they enter the salon, you're right, at least for Annelle (Devon James), who is down-on-her-luck and estranged from her husband. Annelle has turned to fundamentalism to get her through this rough patch. An early prayer is answered when Truvy hires her as an assistant. James' transition from a nervous, mousey, castaway into an easy going, remarried and gleaming diamond-in-the-rough, is a heartwarming journey.



(L to R) Rachel Fowler as M'Lynn
and Adrian Egolf as Shelby
Photo: Michael Enslinger

But the central drama belongs to M'Lynn (Rachel Fowler), a socially prominent career woman, and her attractive and strong-willed daughter Shelby (Adrian Egolf), who is about to be married. Their dynamic revolves around their different approaches to Shelby's diabetes: M'Lynn is protective and controlling, while Shelby is impervious and upbeat. Shelby is a deceptively challenging role, because beneath her determination to live a joyful life, there must be some subtext (which is not explicitly stated in the script) that shows us the power of a heart capable of such steadfast optimism. Egolf finds this light, which serves to make our heartbreak over Shelby's death that much more painful.

Raising a child with a health issue is a challenge for any parent, and M'Lynn is having a difficult time letting go of decades of vigilance. Here, Fowler sets the bar for the steel in the title, as fear and love wrestle within her. When a mother outlives her child, there is a force of nature so strong that it must have its way; when Fowler lets loose M'Lynn's grief, we are right there with her, thankful that we are among friends who understand. In that, we find our catharsis.

All together, what we have here are the fixin's of a perfect tragi-comedy.

Senior Housing Options' *Steel Magnolias* runs at the Barth Hotel, 1514 17th Street, Denver, through August 24th. For tickets, visit www.seniorhousingoptions.org or call

303-595-4464 x10.

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