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Steel Magnolias is in the pink at the Barth Hotel

[A A Comments](#) (0) By [Juliet Wittman](#) Thursday, Aug 15 2013



Michael Ensminger

The ladies of *Steel Magnolias*, now playing at the Barth Hotel.

Steel Magnolias was inspired by the death of playwright [Robert Harling](#)'s diabetic sister, and I've tended to think of it as a pale-pink, Hallmark-card production — which is appropriate, since the ailing Shelby is obsessed with pink and is busily planning a sugar-pink wedding while ensconced in the home salon of wisecracking Truvy. I remembered the show from previous performances as slightly funny and vaguely touching, a feel-good Southern soap about women bonding over love and loss, so that when one of them says her favorite emotion is "laughter through tears," she's pretty much summing up the plot. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why anyone would want to revive this old warhorse now. But the [Barth Hotel](#) production reveals what a difference a first-rate cast can make.

Location Info



Barth Hotel

1514 17th St.
Denver, CO 80202

This is the sixth annual theatrical fundraiser to take place in the antique and elegant lobby of the Barth, one of fourteen residences maintained for elderly and disabled people by the nonprofit Senior Housing Options, and this year's proceeds will go toward transportation and new computers. The setting is appropriate: Like the hotel itself, Truvy's salon serves as a warm place of comfort and refuge. It is frequented by the women of [Natchitoches](#), Louisiana, as they gossip, laugh, pretty up and face life's celebrations, crises and tragedies together.

[Director Ashlee Temple](#) has assembled six of Denver's finest actresses to play these women. Truvy is at the center of everything, the glue that holds the action together, and this gem of a role is well served by [Rhonda Brown](#)'s savvy, funny, sweet-natured and whip-smart portrayal. As the action begins, she's showing a shy young woman by the name of [Annelle](#) the beauty-parlor ropes. Poor Annelle is so timid, she's afraid to so much as touch a customer's hair, but she comes into her own as the evening progresses and slips easily into the role of Truvy's surrogate daughter. Though the character tends to stay in the background, [Devon James](#) manages to make a touching impression in the part. Enter Shelby — a warm-spirited [Adrian Egolf](#) — ready to primp for the wedding, followed by her mother, M'Lynn, who prefers peach to pink and thinks the baby's breath Shelby has selected for her hair is ridiculous; the two bicker in the time-honored way of mothers and daughters. As M'Lynn, [Rachel Fowler](#) keeps a tight grip on her emotions, but in the last scene she takes the play between her two hands and twists it apart in a storm of rage and grief. The indispensable [Billie McBride](#) is cranky, endlessly complaining Ouisier, and Patty Figel — whom we've seen far too infrequently recently — plays her wealthy, football-addicted friend and sparring partner, Clairee. The men of the town are never visible; we learn about their antics through the mocking or loving descriptions of their women.

There's a strong sense of empathy and respect among these actors, all of whom know each others' work, and many of whom have acted together around town in various venues and genres. That leads to terrific ensemble work — perfect timing, and that rare sense of meaning communicated not just through the lines, but between and under them as well. In the end, this often-told story of loss, community and comfort comes across sharp and sweet rather than soapy. And if it's still pink, it's a pink that shades from the tender tint inside a shell to hot pink to the deep black-purple of heart's blood.