

'Steel Magnolias' in full bloom at Shuler Theater

By **Tim Keller**
Special to *The Chronicle-News*

RATON – Six Southern women whose ages span nearly a half-century: All they have in common is that they frequent Truvy's Beauty Shop in Monroe, Louisiana. Being Southern women, they can be as soft as the magnolia blossoms floating in M'Lynn's pool. But as the Shuler Theater's production of "Steel Magnolias" proceeds, we see that these women can be as tough as steel, too.

The fun for the audience is in gradually getting to know these women, and there's no shortage of fun. Thursday's opening-night audience often impeded the characters' lines with laughter too long and too loud, but overall that's a good thing. Southern culture, the 1980s and the qualities of Southern women - and men - all provide plentiful opportunities for humor.

It seems odd that this intimate story of six women was written by one man and directed by another, yet both have succeeded at tapping the humor and pathos of the women's world.

Robert Harling wrote the play in 1987 after the death of his sister. Two years later a hugely successful Hollywood film was released using Harling's screenplay and starring Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, and Julia Roberts. Since so many people have seen the film, they may think there's little point in seeing the play. They'd be wrong.

Visiting California director Perry Self has created a winning combination with this play, his wonderful set, and his cast of six local actresses that shine throughout the play. Self's strength proves to be chemistry: He's succeeded at working with his cast to create six fully rounded women who bicker and backbite but never fail to support each other. Best of all for the audience, these women together are a hoot.

A late replacement who joined the show four days into rehearsals, newcomer Susan Ward is a revelation as Truvy, running the beauty parlor and holding down the play's center. Truvy has some of the comedy's best lines: "The nicest thing I can say about my son's wife is that all of her tattoos are spelled correctly." She says, "I wear a size six shoe but a size seven feels so good that I buy an eight." She tells young trainee Annelle, played by Tess Neary, "There is no such thing as

natural beauty. Remember that or we are all out of a job."

Two old women love going at each other's throats, except in tender moments when we discover they have soft hearts. Janese Little's Clairee is a recently widowed pillar of Monroe who eventually buys a local radio station that sounds surprisingly like Raton's KRTN, right down to Osos' promotions. Clairee's humorous lines include, "I really like football, but it's hard to parlay that into a reason to live."

Longtime Shuler veteran Brenda Ferri continues to surprise and impress as a character actor, disappearing into the cantankerous Ouiser, the town grouch who warns, "Don't try to get on my good side: I no longer have one." She says, "I'm not crazy. I've just been in a very bad mood for 40 years." Her crusted surface hides a heart of gold that's revealed only late in the play.

The plot centers on young Shelby, beautifully played by Jillian Solano. The first of four scenes takes place in Truvy's shop the morning of Shelby's Easter wedding. We learn that Shelby has health issues that become more complicated in the second scene, set at Christmas, when we discover that Shelby is pregnant. Her story is tender and bitter-sweet, although she, too, has plenty of laugh lines: "Daddy says an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of manure."

Adrienne Coleman plays Shelby's mother, M'Lynn, who worries enough about Shelby that Shelby figures there's no need for her to worry about herself. Coleman also played another crucial mother's role in the play "Two by Two," which just closed at the Shuler.

Stefani Milstrey's lighting and sound-design work well and keep the story moving, aided by Adella Garcia's effective period props. Ursula Garcia's 1980s women's costumes are mostly right and often a source of great fun for the characters and the audience.

"Steel Magnolias" plays at the Shuler Saturday night at 7:30 p.m., Sunday at 2:30 p.m. and August 2 and 3 at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors and \$5 for children. Books of 10 tickets are available for \$100. Tickets and information are available at the Shuler Theater, (575) 445-4746.



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Four scenes over a period of two years follow six Louisiana women whose lives are intertwined through their friendships at Truvy's Beauty Shop in Monroe, Louisiana. The Shuler Theater production of "Steel Magnolias" stars, from left, Tess Neary, Janese Little, Susan Ward, Jillian Solano, Brenda Ferri, and Adrienne Coleman.



Pankaj Khadka / *The Chronicle-News*

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