

The Sharon Playhouse, Sharon, CT
Steel Magnolias, by Robert Harling. Directed by Jackson Gay.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I am not about to open a new can of worms.”

What defines a comedy? Traditionally it is a play in which no one dies. Prepare yourself for “Steel Magnolias” at The Sharon Playhouse. Someone you fall in love with does die. There are laughs throughout the play, but the show is a tragedy with an upbeat ending. Six southern women meet constantly at Truvy’s Beauty Salon in Chinquapin, Louisiana to have their hair done, gossip and exchange those secrets that cannot be kept. They range in age from 20-something Shelby to her mother M’Lynn in her late forties to Ouiser, a sixty-or-so woman with a sense of revenge on the world that has attempted, unsuccessfully, to ignore her. Act One’s two scenes are set in April and December of 1987 and Act Two is set eighteen months later in June and then in November of 1989. Hairstyles change but these women do not. They are who they are, for better or worse.



Emma Simon, Susan Cella, Jen Cody, Liza Vann, Etta Grover; Photo: Aly Morrissey

Truvy’s new assistant, Annelle, undergoes a series of transformations, religious and physical. Shelby goes through marriage, healthcare and motherhood. The other four remain who they are, what they are and where they are in life. Truvy never changes at all, but at least the others have new hairstyles. What does change for them all is their feelings about one another and about Shelby, a serious diabetic, survival is of infinite importance, even to Ouiser, the cynic.

Director Jackson Gay, who directed the excellent “Slow Food” at the Dorset Theater

Festival and a fine edition of “The Prom” earlier this season at The Sharon Playhouse, has missed a few beats my theater companion and I agreed on the ride home. This play’s performance has a certain stagnancy as these very vital women stand around or sit around and do not physically react to what they’re hearing, a vey un-southern attitude and boring to watch. This play should be a fuller representation of the southern attitude. It would be more fun and more correct. Other production I have seen, including the Broadway original and the fine all-star film version managed to give us fuller characters than appear on the Connecticut stage.

Not that these six actresses are lesser than their predecessors. Each one is a pleasure to watch and listen to in this play. They just don’t appear to be emotionally involved in one another’s problems. Jen Cody is a lovely Truvy, managing everyone else’s life while creating their appearances. Emma Simon gives her young helper, Annelle, a sincere interpretation, her every word as myopic as her non-comprehending vision of things around her. Susan Cella’s Claree is both funny and touching as she brings reality to bear on every subject she touches. As mother and daughter, M’Lynn and Shelby, Marinell Crippen and Etta Grover establish their relationship slowly but surely and each delivers emotional moments with truth and beauty. Ouiser is played by the sharp-tongued Lisa Vann with the right touch of angular personal evil dressed up as honest concern. A better regional cast could not be conceived. It is just the beats among them that don’t hold together perfectly.

An interesting set designed by Christopher and Justin Swader, lighting by Will Nash Broyles and sound created by Graham Stone enhance the production. Modern clothes by Kathleen DeAngelis confused the time period of the play.



Marinell Crippen, Emma Simon, Susan Cella;
Photo: Aly Morrissey

This is ultimately a decent production. Laugh at what tickles you and be prepared to cry real tears. Just don’t expect a hilarious, laugh-out-loud comedy. Steel Magnolias is not that show.

+ 09/01/2024 +

Steel Magnolias plays at The Sharon Playhouse, 49 Amenia Road, Sharon Connecticut through September 8. For information and tickets go to boxoffice@sharonplayhouse.org or call 860.364.7469 (ext. 200 & 201).