

'Magnolias' ladies prove to audience they're tough as steel

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Photo: Melodie Wolford, left, plays M'Lynn and Meredith Forlenza plays M'Lynn's daughter, Shelby, in the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina's performance of "Steel Magnolias." *-Special to the Packet*

The definition of "steel magnolias," for our particular purpose, is "delicate as a magnolia and tough as steel." And can I tell you, the six ladies that formed the cast of this warm-hearted comedy drama, "Steel Magnolias," on stage at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina, lived up to that definition.

They were likeable, believable, witty, sharp-tongued, headstrong and a bit eccentric. They used their humor and heroism to deal with issues both funny and affecting, and in the end we would love to call each of them a friend.

Playwright Robert Harling, who is known for "Evening Star," "Soapdish" and "First Wives Club," also is known for the immediacy that he brings to his works. "Steel Magnolias" is particularly immediate, as Harling drew it from his experience in dealing with the death of his sister as she faced the impact of the complications of diabetes.

And while in "Steel Magnolias" there are some tragic, heart-wrenching issues, the play moves to hilarious, physically funny, even frenzied, wacky-tacky Southern comedic moments. Through it all, the take-away message is that this production is about the strong relationships that exist among these women, this enterprising team of Southern ladies, who come together in the most appealing and memorable way.

Loaded with one-liners, and some audacious zingers, the evening is punctuated with explosions of laughter. Much of the audience totally related to comments about Shakespeare, Ann Bolyn, public radio, face-lifts, dogs named Rhett and armadillo-shaped wedding cakes. What a riot! Listen carefully.

It's kind of "chick theater" for sure. The distaff side of the audience was the major focus. But that is not to say the men in the crowd didn't enjoy the performance. Many seemed to respond to it, enjoy the women and wish they had known Drum, M'Lynn's husband, or Jackson, Shelby's husband, or even the mysterious Owen, who adds sparkle to Ouiser's life. Everybody appeared to enjoy Harling's script and the cast's exquisitely timed delivery.

The entire play is set in Truvy's Beauty Parlor -- the most perfect Southern beauty parlor in the most perfect Southern town, Chinquapin, La. This is the '80s, so the term "beauty parlor" is apt here, and big hair, big news and regular appointments are the order of the day. The parlor was a place to go for hair, nails and some well-chosen words. Once you arrive at the parlor, take in the clothes, the shoes, the coffee pot, the magazines, the radio, the hair dryers, the shop chairs and the mirrors. All are spot-on.

The story, you'll remember, revolves around Shelby Eatenton, soon to be Shelby Latcherie, whom we meet on her wedding day, and her mother, M'Lynn Eatenton, a social worker and wife of Drum. Meredith Forlenza plays Shelby, a headstrong young woman looking forward to a new life as the wife of Jackson but engaged in a medical battle for her life. M'Lynn is played with intensity by Melodie Wolford. The story of birth, life and death, which reaches out to the rest of the cast and is as much about relationships as it is about events, continues through the next three years.

Stand out in her role as Clairee Belcher, the former first lady of Chinquapin, is Nora Chester, of The Actors Company Theatre of New York. As Clairee, she offers a stunning performance as she presents this strong, sensitive woman, dealing with the loss of her powerful husband.

Oiser Boudreaux, played by Peggy Cosgrove, is loaded with energetic, prickly sarcasm. We love her more when she comments that "she isn't crazy, she has just been in a bad mood for 40 years." She's sharp-tongued and then she's soft and all too human, and we love to see her change as time passes.

There is lots of change, too, in the character of Annelle, played by Lulu Fogarty. We meet her on her first day of work at Truvy's, as a shy, insecure girl. We follow her as she becomes a partying, sequined, big-hair woman, then finally catch up with her as a Bible-toting evangelical church lady, lace collar and all.

Truvy Jones, played by Denise Cormier, delights us as a level-headed business woman dealing with the problems of her husband and sons. We watch as she handles her good friends effectively, but not quite as effectively as the men in her life.

The play continues as tears fall from laughter and sadness. The audience gets through the emotions with a healthy dose of optimism, looking forward to the relationships, their strong commitment to each other and a few more laughs.

The well-paced piece moves right along, thanks to the direction of Russell Treyz, who has seen to numerous productions at the arts center. The ladies, their hairdos, their hairnets and head bands and their Southern-style outfits were just right, thanks to the work of Costume Director and Resident Designer Jennifer P. Correll.

Again, when the six amazing women took their last bow at curtain time, the audience stood, applauded and wished we might have known the characters personally.