

STEEL MAGNOLIAS

By

ROBERT HARDING

THE WAREHOUSE THEATRE

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Obviously I have seen the film, as I imagine most of the audience had also done, I hated the film and found it mawkish and trite so I was not looking forward to this. Now I realise that the real errors of the film were having men in it and moving locations - it is the intensity and honesty of the women in that one room that makes the play live and ILS did a superb job and the audience were engaged from beginning to end. I really enjoyed myself, thank you.

PRESENTATION

The salon was excellently designed and I liked the way it changed throughout the show – no scene looked exactly like the previous one. It was well constructed and gave the actors confidence to use the space well – so a big thank you to Dave, Brian and Peter for their hard work. I like the busyness of the dressing of the stage without it being too cluttered – there was no mention of props in the programme but whoever was in charge of them had a good sense of period and of Turvy's approach to her salon. The dressing of the women in this play was crucial as their appearance defined their characters and I think Felicity did a good job throughout - especially with Shelby (so much pink!) - and the curtain call look was very clever so well done there. To be doing the hair with this script must have been a challenge for Kaye and Viv and they did it so well – the early eighties glamour looks were well reproduced and each of the women had a good style for their characters and their make-up was also suitable – job well done. Lighting and sound were also spot on – not easy with the radio effects I imagine and I especially liked the brightness of the salon lighting which of course is necessary in that sort of business so well done to Brian. The stage management was not demanding during the performance but clearly Paul and Dave had to be very efficient during the scene breaks and everything ran smoothly so thank you both. As this is such a famous film it was important to

get the presentation as accurate as possible and you all did so well at this. Congratulations.

PRODUCTION

Celia and Scott should be patting each other on the back for making this play such a success. The range of these six characters, the emotional flow of the script and the overall setting of the work set up challenges for the director and producer and they definitely rose to meet them. It is all too easy to be over-sentimental and 'wring the withers' as it were but this was avoided by allowing the actors to show the weaknesses of the woman as well as their strengths and the relationships felt true to life. I am not denying that your task was made easier by a group of formidable actors but at the same time you had to keep them under control and you certainly did that. I think you used very clever grouping – it is a nice sized stage at the Warehouse and you did not clutter it and there was space to move about naturally, and even at times when the group was forced by the script to cluster together there was no masking. Being an insulin dependent diabetic myself I rather dreaded the scene where Selby starts to slip into a coma but it was very well done and the symptoms were right without the excess that often accompanies the performance of illness – well-researched. The pace was good throughout and the energy levels were well controlled including M'Lynn's meltdown in the final scene. I do not think that the performance that I saw could have drawn the audience in any more – not a dry eye in the house but not a breath either to distract from the moment. An insightful and powerful piece of direction. Thank you Celia.

ACTING

Before I discuss the acting and characterisation I would like to mention the accents. It is so very easy to over do a southern American accent and sound like bad extras from Uncle Remus but clearly Celia had a very definite view on what it should sound like and, apart from the very occasional slip, all the actors maintained these difficult cadences throughout, so congratulations to cast and director for this real achievement.

TRUVY – IRENE GLYNN

What a great role Irene and you did it so well. You made the hard-headed business woman with a heart of gold the centre of the group and you completely got the earthiness of this practical character. Her kindness, masked by acerbic comments, did not get in the way of her practical side. She had made the salon a haven for the others which you put across very well. Your relationships with Annelle and M'Lynn were particularly strong and I liked your attitude towards Shelby when you were cutting her hair at the beginning of Act II. Altogether you gave a strong performance in the role that held the play together. Well done.

ANNELLE – KAYLEIGH STOREY

An interesting part in which the character grows in confidence and humour and, in spite of the women in the salon, follows her own path of faith and grows with it. You put this across very well Kayleigh and developed from a nervous young girl throwing herself on the mercy of Truvy for home and employment to a strong woman with a family of her own and a deeply held faith. This was possibly the most varied role in the play and you held it well throughout. I particularly liked your portrayal of Annelle's early attempts to bring religion to the salon. I am sure IES sees you as a real asset. Congratulations.

CLAIREE – JO NEAGLE

Clairee was a great creation by Jo. This busy lady who sees herself as the town's first lady and has fingers in every pie was such fun and the self-awareness of her aura of consequence, which was not an obvious feature of the script, made Clairee a real and funny person. Jo was particularly strong in the scene where M'Lynn and Shelby tell the women about the dialysis and after the initial shock Clairee shows a calm and practical side which Jo put across well. Her manhandling of Ouiser in the scene when M'Lynn wants to hit something hard was very funny indeed. A very good characterisation.

SHELBY – PAULA DENNING

What a challenge but what a part Paula! You must have loved every minute of the process of this play and I guess you feel bereft that it is over. You really did it justice. It is so easy to overact dramatic roles but you kept a real grip on what was a difficult role to take on. I really believed in the character flaws and the various levels of your relationship with M'Lynn were all believable. As I said before I was really impressed with the diabetic collapse. It was just at the right level – no dramatics just the slipping away and the angry rejection of help because all you think about is people stopping you going to sleep. I don't know if you researched the symptoms or just felt your way but what you did was impressive. The pairing of you and Yvonne as mother and daughter was an inspired piece of casting (well done Celia) and your ups and downs together were convincing. I loved the scene where you and M'Lynn told the others about the dialysis and the transplant – you both got the mixture of humour and potential tragedy just right. A very impressive performance. Thank you.

M'LYNN – YVONNE McGUINNESS

For me this was the performance of the show. I am not going to say you were outstanding because you were too good to stand out – you just were M'Lynn. All your relationships were convincing. I will not repeat what I have already said about you and Paula but I will say that you were that mother and the audience felt your irritation, frustration, love and despair. When you talked about Shelby's death there was not a dry eye in the house – the man sitting next to me kept apologising to me for sniffing – and you put across the whole pain and joy of parenthood in that sentence, "I was supposed to go first." I thought all your relationships were good and the friendships felt real and I could sense the feeling that you had that the salon was your safe place. Thank you for a very special performance.

OUISER – SUSAN SWAN

You had a really good time Susan and built a very entertaining character. I thought you did well in putting across so defensively your growing relationship with Owen without being too hard about it and your face when Clairee held you up for M'Lynn to smack

was a picture of outraged amazement. You had great timing for Ouiser's one liners – the section in Act II scene 2 when you were talking about Anne Boleyn's fingers was very funny indeed. I loved your description of yourself in the programme and you clearly felt that you identified with this wonderful character. Great comic timing. Well done.

CONCLUSION

Thank you so much for such a good evening's entertainment. It was very hot in such a packed house (wonderful to see this for a play) and I much appreciated the ice cream. IES should be thrilled to have six excellent actresses on their team. I look forward to my next visit.

POLLY ENGLISH