



Mettle Detectors

"Steel Magnolias" stars discover character tempered by crisis in new South Valley Civic Theater production

LOCAL

'Steel' kicking after all these years

■ If you liked the movie, you'll love SVCT's stage version of good ol' "Steel Magnolias"

For those of you unfamiliar with the plot of Robert Harling's dramatic comedy, "Steel Magnolias" (which opened last weekend at the South Valley Playhouse), listen up, y'all.

Many of you are familiar with the film version. Same plot, fewer characters, one set. If you saw the movie, you will still enjoy the play, perhaps even more, as we found out last Saturday night.

The single set is Trudy's Beauty Shop in Chinquapin, Louisiana. There, we are privy to the lives of six fascinating women as they share their joys and heartaches with each other. The fascinating women are essayed by Annie M. Burro (Ouiser), Debra Doyle (Shelby), Amanda Duarte (Annelle), Kathleen Shelton (Lynn), Kay Drummond Lumley (Claire) and Linda Still (wonderful as Trudy).

Duarte assumes the character of Annelle, a young woman down on her luck who has just been hired by Trudy. We soon discover that high spirited Shelby is getting married today. She and her mother, Lynn, don't exactly see eye to eye on every point of the wedding. Claire and Ouiser are the other regulars at Trudy's.

Through the women's conversations, we learn of Shelby's diabetes and her doctor's warnings never to have any children. Enough said about the "plot." The play is also about how these women communicate and deal with all "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

Each of the six actresses has many fine moments on stage. The strong cast developed a sense of unity after some early botched lines and missed timing. A few times, some of the actresses were listening as actresses, rather than responding character-to-character. As the company becomes more confident, time should heal those flaws.

Estill is always in command. The play is set on her Trudy character's turf, hence she directs much of the action. Her reactions to Lynn in the play's last scene contributes greatly to the impact of that scene. Lumley appeared a little unsure of herself early on, but soon took a firm control of Claire, the widow of the town's former mayor. I loved the way she underplayed her many humorous lines.

Burro has great energy and presence, but at moments seemed to fall in and out of character.

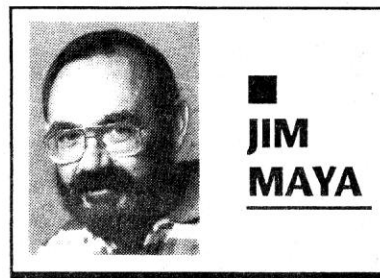
Duarte's Annelle actually goes through more changes than any other character in the show.

Duarte, an excellent young actress, handled them very well, though her character could have been more subtle at times.

Shelby and Lynn are the pivotal characters, at the center of the play's conflict. Both Doyle and Shelton gave strong performances, though I did have some problems picking up on the deep love their characters must project, a sense of mutual devotion shared amidst the bickering. If I had, the play's last dramatic moments would have been even more powerful.

No matter. The last scene is genuinely moving, especially Shelton's monologue with Lynn's friends tenderly focusing on her while she sits.

Katie Amstutz's direction was first rate. Her blocking flowed well and the cast projected a strong sense of unified purpose,



■
**JIM
MAYA**

IN MAYA 'PINION

a major responsibility of a director.

Trudy's Beauty Shop grabbed my attention the moment I walked into the theater, as a good set should do. Watching the cast work the set — actually "doing" hair while "doing" the play — brought a heightened reality to the show. And I loved the costumes.

"Steel Magnolias" is a top-rate community theater production that will only get better. I recommend it! This production continues through May 9. Call 842-SHOW for exact dates and times, or check today's "Front Row" calendar.

A great time to go would be this Saturday night. The South Valley Hospital Foundation will be hosting the performance as part of its efforts to raise money for a fetal heart monitoring system. The \$20 ticket will include a gourmet dessert reception with the cast after the show. Call 848-8646 for tickets.

Don't forget: "Our Town" (Gilroy High) and "Hair" (Gavin) open May 1.

Jim Maya teaches drama at Gilroy High School. His column appears each week in Front Row.

South Valley Civic Theatre
presents



STEEL MAGNOLIAS



*starring Fannie Curro, Debra Doyle, Amanda Duarte,
Linda Estill, Fay Lumley and Kathleen Shelton*

SVCT's sweet smell of success

'Steel Magnolias' has local thespians dreaming of a strong box office hit

By CHRIS GARCIA

Staff Writer

MORGAN HILL

To those who think "Steel Magnolias" is an unabashed ode to treacly women's issues with a bit of good old-fashioned man trashing thrown in, you're right. If that sort of thing is your cup of tea, you won't want to miss South Valley Civic Theater's current production.

It's all there, from rampant gossip and incorrigible vanity to petty problems and, yep, PMS. But, insists director Katie Amstutz, it's much more than tantrums and Tupperware. Such glaring stereotypes are merely stepping stones to higher, more universal, issues, a way to strip away the finely crafted veneers to reveal the true emotionally heady conflicts confronting a close-knit sextet of Southern women.

"It deals specifically with women characters, how they've nurtured friendships and how they allow those friendships to grow and expand," explains Amstutz. "They come in to the beauty shop (where all the action unfolds) not to get their hair done. They come in to get support, to talk about the men in their lives and how those relationships affect them."

About the bombardment of women's stereotypes dominating most of the first act, Amstutz replies, "I think this show negates them."

While societal myth has it that men are supposed to be made of steel, Amstutz says, here the strength of six women gradually tempered in the face of tragedy and in the absence of their spineless men confirms that they themselves are steel magnolias (magnolias, the delicate Southern flower, being emblematic of soft-souled women).

It is because of the group's ironclad support system — inherent in women's relationships, not men's — that they undergo "a huge transformation" and are enabled to "bloom," says Amstutz.

Having a flowery beauty shop as the sole setting, where, it seems, the women virtually live, is itself a deliberately misleading symbol of underlying truths.



LISA M. BROWN/Staff Photographer

Jedgling beautician Annelie (Amanda Duarte) discusses fashion do's and don'ts with longtime customer Clairee (Fay Lumley) at Truvy's Beauty Shop, the sole setting of South Valley Civic Theater's production of "Steel Magnolias."

"The beauty shop is not only a place where women gather. It's through coming inside that we find there's more going on than just vanity and gossip," Amstutz says. "You just have to look at that set. It's so gross — the soft colors, flowered pillows. It's almost drippy, almost gooey."

As usual, the irrepressible South Valley Civic Theater (SVCT) crew is responsible for the evocative set. It's rendered reality-approved via such familiar details as a whirling fan, glamour magazines, wicker furniture, a framed, check-sized beautician license, hair and nail products, even a screen door for sultry Southern summers.

Following a cyclical seasonal chronology, "Steel Magnolias" probes the personal and public lives of a multi-generational group of girlfriends: Truvy Jones (Linda Estill), Annelie Dupuy-Desoto (Amanda Duarte), Clairee Belcher (Fay Lumley), Shelby Eatenton-Lacherie (Debra Doyle), M'Lynn Eatenton (Kathleen Shelton) and Ouiser Boudreaux (Fannie Curro).

Estille, who portrays Truvy in the play, brought it to the company's attention. "It's just such a small town show and there's a closeness in it as there is in Gilroy," she says.

WHAT: South Valley Civic Theater's "Steel Magnolias"
WHERE: South Valley Playhouse, 235 Tennant Station, Morgan Hill
WHEN: April 17 through May 9
DIRECTOR: Katie Amstutz
TICKETS: \$10 general, \$6 seniors and students. Call 842-SHOW

Leaving more to the power of imagination and suggestion, the play refuses to hold viewers' hands through the more subtle passages, insisting members of the audience keep their brains on alert.

Still, "Magnolias" is very much a comedy. Among humorous chats about patio furniture, Bisquick recipes and the best shade of nail polish are homilies and truisms, witticisms and criticisms delivered in thick Louisiana twangs (thanks to the coaching of Texas native Lumley).

And those concerned they'll need plastic bibs as protection from the sap factor needn't worry. Amstutz promises a provocative work that will hopefully shatter, then reconstruct, men's and women's notions of what women are supposed to be. "It's a real affirmative play, she points out. The theme is 'life goes on.' And I don't think you have to be a female to appreciate that."