



Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society  
Production : Steel Magnolias  
Date : June 14<sup>th</sup> 2014  
Venue : Faringdon Junior School, Faringdon, Oxon.  
Report by : Rob Bertwistle

## Report

I was pleased to be invited to your production of **Steel Magnolias** - on this occasion deputising for Gareth Jeremy who was unable to attend. On arrival I received a warm welcome from **Debbie Lock** (the Director of the play) and was shown into the auditorium (a vast school assembly hall) and introduced to **Front of House Co-ordinator, Carolyn Taylor**. It was nice to see all those involved with the production wearing the society's black polo shirts bearing the group's logo.

At the rear of the seating area was a display of photographs from the rehearsal period and some striking portrait shots of the players. I felt it would have been an added bonus to have had the pictures labelled with the character and actors name and this also helps the audience become more quickly acquainted with the characters. A small informal bar serving wine and soft drinks was adjacent to this.

### The Production.

As the programme informs us: 'Steel Magnolias is a heart-warming bitter sweet comedy which tells the story of six very special friends bonded together by mutual triumphs and tragedies. Sharing each other's strength and loyalty, these remarkable women survive the cycle of life, birth and death to emerge stronger, closer and still laughing'. It started life as a short story written by the author **Robert Harding** to enable him to come to terms with his sisters death (**Shelby** in the play) and was later turned into a successful stage play and film.

### Principals.

A strong ensemble cast is needed in this production which has six female characters all 'leads' in their own rights. **Debbie Lock** had assembled a strong and talented group of actors.

**Truvy** the gutsy owner of the Beauty Parlour (in which the entire play is set) was played with strong conviction by **Helen Thrower**. She clearly enjoyed the part and I liked her cheery interactions and quick one-liners with her friends and 'clients'. Good strong accent maintained through out and believable hair-dressing skills on display to my un-trained eye at least.

**Annelle** Truvy's recently acquired assistant and new girl in town was played by **Laura Coleman**. She blossomed from nervous new-comer to become an integral member of the group of friends. I liked Laura's portrayal as her character grew in confidence. She also captured the slightly dotty side of the character when Annelle suddenly leaves her duties to kneel and pray in the middle of the room. Good accent and use of facial expressions.

**Clairee** was played with mischievous glee by **Joan Lee**. As the recently widowed wife of the town mayor Clairee was discovering that there was life after death! Always ready with a sharp and pointed

retort I liked Joan's portrayal of the dry humoured character. Again, a strong well maintained accent was shown and some lovely moments in the final scene with good comic timing but also showing nice pathos too. Well done!

**M'Lynn** and **Shelby**, mother and daughter, were played to great effect by **Amanda Linstead** and **Yvonne Kelly** respectively. The drama from the piece is derived from these two characters and the conflict, yet strong bond of love, which exists between them. Both actors turned in first class portrayals of that bond. Very believable performances and the scene where Shelby tells her mother she is pregnant was very well observed. I was particularly struck by M'Lynn's heart-rending outburst in the final scene which was in good contrast to her rather restrained character earlier in the play. Shelby's frailty yet determination to have a child despite knowing the risks involved was very well captured. Good accents and characterisations maintained through-out. Very well done!

**Ouiser** This character was certainly brought to life by **Jo Webster**. From her first entrance she held the stage and the audience. Playing the bad tempered but actually good natured Ouiser, Jo captured the character very well. Good, strong comic timing yet tempered with some lovely pathos in the final scene made this a memorable performance. Very good facial expressions and consistent accent. Well done!

**Director: Debbie Lock.** This is a challenging piece to bring to life as it can sometimes be perceived as a lot of chit chat among a group of women with not much actually happening until the drama with Shelby begins to unfold. However, Debbie made the play interesting from the start. With good defined characters and interesting use of the playing area, there was always something going on to hold the audience's attention. I think there could have been more pace in parts - just picking up on those cues makes a world of difference to the overall feel of the play. Well done! Some beautifully observed moments.

At this point I feel I must add that not all the dialogue was audible (to me) from my seat at the back. It's so important that actors (and directors) remember that not all members of the audience have perfect hearing and that the acoustics of the venue can have a tremendous effect on the ability of the sound to travel. It's one of my bug bears I'm afraid because if one can't hear one can quickly become dis-engaged from what is happening on stage. It's all about projection and your venue was a particularly unfriendly one, acoustically speaking. Also please be aware that lines delivered up-stage stand even more chance of being lost to the audience.

**The set:** Designed by **Jo Webster** and constructed by **Jeff Barry, Richard Lock, Ron McLaughlin, Alan Merrick** and **Peter Webster** (who all also acted as **Back-stage Crew**)

A functional one set design which served the actors well. Please make sure doors close properly and stay closed! It's so distracting for actor and audience if doors are a problem. One other point - could there have been some form of floor covering put down to mask the sound of shoes on the hard stage floor? (Or maybe some felt could be attached to the soles of the shoes?) It was quite distracting on some occasions, even to the point of masking the dialogue. I liked the split level effect. Talking with one of the crew in the interval I learned that the company had not hired any part of the set. Well done it was very effective.

**Lighting:** **Ian Chandler, Paul Mountford-Lister** and **Sound: Gary Bates.** All worked well though this production did not call for a complicated lighting or sound plot.

**Props: Ceri Baker, Fiona Merrick.** This production required quite a few props which were in period and used to good effect by the cast.

**Costumes: Jeni Summerfield, Joan Lee and Lynda Bates.** Again the costumes all appeared in period and were presumably sourced from the company. Every one looked at ease in their costume and were suitable for the character. Well done! Make up was good! Under-stated and looked totally in keeping with the period of the play.

**Programme design: David Headey.** Simple yet effective design giving all the relevant information about the group and how to join etc. I like to see actor biographies and pictures included too.

**Front of House Team: Lynda Bates, Sarah Couzens, Katie Dyet, Gary Field, Jayne Hoyland, Mary Mountford-Lister, Denise Monk, Shela Rowan, Carole Tappenden and Alan Taylor.** Often a thankless task but a very important part of the theatrical experience for audiences out for an evening's entertainment. Well done to you all and thank you for making me feel so welcome.

May I wish you every success with your next production 'Reflections 1914 – 1918' in November.

**Rob Bertwistle**

**Regional Rep.**

**NODA London District 12**