On all counts, show's a winner

Performances of the Avon Players production of "Steel Magnolias" continue through Saturday, Feb. 16, at the playhouse in Rochester Hills. For ticket information call the box office at 375-1300

By Mark S. Carley
special writer

Avon Players' staging of Robert Harling's "Steel Magnolias" is amateur theater at its finest.

The play, one of the best of the 1980s, is poignant, very funny and extremely well crafted. The Avon production is of professional quality and is far better than the movie, with which many of us are familiar.

The story, set in a Louisiana beauty shop, highlights the lives, loves, triumphs and trials of six Southern women. There is lots of broad comedy, counterpointed masterfully by human tragedy at the play's climax.

Michele Millirons plays Truvy, the owner of the beauty shop and anchor of the play. At first her character seems too brassy and her accent *overdone, but she definitely* grows on you and winds up playing her pivotal role very nicely.

LISA JESSWEIN is Annelle, Truvy's assistant. She plays the mixed-up and vulnerable Annelle as a lost puppy-dog, winning genuine sympathy for her pathetic character. When she takes up fundamentalist Christianity, she is so endearing that she almost makes one forget about Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart.

Clairee, played by Ginny deSchweinitz, is the former first lady of the town. Now a widow, she looks for something useful to do with herself and winds up buying the local radio station. DeSteiger plays Clairee with a great sense of style. Her counterpart is the town grouch, Ouiser. Ouiser, as she puts it, "has been in a bad mood for 40 years." Her orneriness is matched only by her rapier wit — a deadly tool in the hands of actress Sue Warner.

The plot of "Steel Magnolias" focuses on the lives of Shelby, a beautiful but delicate young woman, and her long-suffering mother, M'Lynn. The first scene deals with Shelby's impending wedding, and the last scene with the terrible consequences of her frail constitution. Gail DiDio is a wonderful Shelby. She infuses the character with a sense of vibrance and love that makes her physical condition all the more tragic.

Dianne Biernat is simply outstanding in the play's most difficult role, that of M'Lynn. Her work during the climactic scene, as she deals with the loss of her daughter, is certainly worthy of some sort of award.

I could write a long paragraph lauding the performances of each of these fine artresses, but I also have seen many plays which featured fine acting and still do not work. A lot of the credit for the pacing, comic timing and ensemble appeal of this production goes to director Joe Burdick.

It's hilarious but out of whack

Performances of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" continue through Sunday, Feb. 24, on the Oakland University campus in Rochester Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 377-3300

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

review

Uproarious, thigh-slapping, vaudevillian antics dominate Meadow Brook Theatre's production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Lack of contrast and balance, not of laughter, are the show's problems.

Director John Ulmer's admittedly entertaining comedy homogenizes the three distinct worlds of Shakespeare created in the play — the woodland kingdom of the fairies, the wellborn Athenian world of young lovers and the simple world of the rough tradesmen.

Ulmer reduces them all to the lowest common denominator, — the broad, crowd-pleasing comedy usually reserved for Nick Bottom and his simpleton sidekicks.

In the Meadow Brook production, there is little contrast between the slapstick antics of Bottom and the amorous pursuits of the young lovers Lysander, Demetrius, Hermia and Helena.

Ulmer's apparent decision to play for laughs results in a production dominated by heavy-handed comedy that smothers the delicate, dream magic of the fairies and overpowers the play's graceful poetry.

Gone is a musing wonderment at the mysterious non-logic of love. Instead Ulmer delivers ample fanny patting and lusty groping — enough to make the audience wonder whether the flower potion dropped into sleeping lovers' eyes might be distilled hormones rather than a fairy elixir.

GONE IS THE dream magic of Theseus and Hippolyta's world in a mystical wooded kingdom populated by fairies.

The fairies have been banished. Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, Mustardseed and other unnamed sprites who traditionally flit about the woodland in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" have been replaced by two macabre, black-robed, monkish creatures carrying wind chimes.

They move with lugubrious steps more like a funeral procession than the sprightly dance of fairies. They seem to portend ominous happenings rather than impish devilry.

A baby-faced Puck (Ricky Wright) cartwheels and catapults around causing mayhem, but for some unfathomable, irritating reason he spends every moment not in motion sitting with his thumb in his mouth.

AS BOTH Theseus and Oberon, James Anthony leads the fine cast.

His in-charge voice seems born to rule whether his subjects be Athenians, fairies or his own queen (Kathryn Grant). He keeps his dignity yet projects a playful sense of fun in his dual roles.

Joseph Reed is especially fine as Egeus. Hermia's exasperated father.

The young lovers, Lysander (R. Ward Duffy), Demetrius (Richard A. Scrot), Hermia (Mary Proctor) and Helena (Sue Kenny) are comely and full of youthful rebellion and lusty energy.

In the Meadow Brook production, they wear Edwardian costumes rather than Athenian, a palatable change that brings the romance of petticoats and lace, hourglass silhouettes, and dapper gentleman's wear into the mysteries of love.

AS USUAL, Nick Bottom steals the show. Eric Tavares as Bottom capitalizes on the plum role and milks it for laughs with all the skill of a consummate comedian.

His donkey head may make him look more like Harvey, the giant rabbit, than an ass, and his overgrown teeth may garble his speech, but he uses everything — teeth, knees, feet, elbows and hoof-like hands — to humorous advantage.

His simpleton chums Francis Flute (Randall Godwin), Tom Snout (Roy Dennison), Snug (LeRoy Mitchell Jr.), Robin Starveling (Thomas D. Mahard) and Peter Quince (Perry B. Stewart) play bumbling, shy, hilariously funny characters.

But what of the inexplicable madness of love, the delicate mystery of dreams, and the magic of midsummer's night? They hide in the shadows, overwhelmed by the sound of raucous laughter.

Cathie Breidenbach of West Bloloomfield teaches college writing classes and works as a freelance writer.

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