
Steel Magnolias

By Robert Harling

Study Guide

Created by Creekside High School Literature Class of Carmen Kinnebrew
As part of the Alliance Theatre Institute for Educators and Teaching Artists'
Dramaturgy by Students Program
Under the guidance of Teaching Artist Ebony Tucker

Steel Magnolias opened originally off-Broadway at the WPA Theatre in New York City on March 28, 1987. The production transferred to the Lucille Lortel Theatre on June 19, 1987. The play closed on February 25, 1990 after 1,126 performances. The Broadway debut opened at the Lyceum Theatre officially on April 4, 2005.

**Steel Magnolias can be seen on the Alliance Theatre stage
October 22, 2014 to November 9, 2014**

Awards

The original *Steel Magnolias* movie won the People's Choice Award for Favorite Dramatic Movie in 1990.



Reviews

"Robert Harling's "Steel Magnolias" offers audiences a nice mix of sweetness, sass, tears and laughter..."

-Jay Handleman *Herald-Tribune*

"*Steel Magnolias* is so immersed by the conviction of its story that in a way it becomes an extension of our own human experience."

-David Keyes, *Cinemaphile.org*

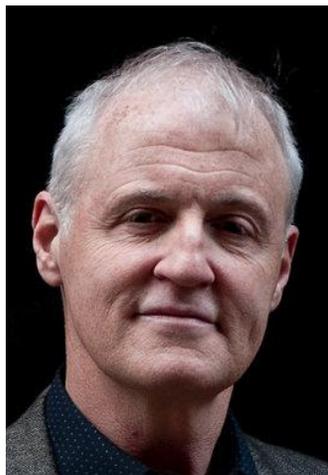
Steel Magnolias About the Playwright Robert Harling

Robert Harling was born in Louisiana in 1951. He graduated from Northwestern State University and received a law degree from Tulane University Law School in New Orleans, Louisiana. He has a passion for music, as he was also in a band while in law school. Shortly after graduating from law school, he decided that acting was the better profession.

As a young man Robert was very ambitious. He moved to New York in 1978 and sold tickets on Broadway to support himself. Robert worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken, but he still managed acting as a hobby. He auditioned for acting jobs and he also acted in quite a few commercials.

Harling's personal life was very influential to his success. He wrote the play *Steel Magnolias* and then created the screenplay. It was produced in 1989 starring Dolly Parton and Julia Roberts. Harling played the small role of a minister in the movie.

"It took the world's biggest movie star to play my sister"



-Photo from New York Times, Andrew Testa

Robert Harling is known for many plays and books. His play *Steel Magnolias* was based on events that occurred in his life.

"There will be a lot of people watching the movie now who don't know that it's based on a true story..."

Robert was devastated, and furious at fate. "I ranted and raved to a playwright friend, and he just kept saying, 'Write it down,' " he says. So he did. *Magnolias* began as a short story, something to provide his nephew and namesake with "a sense of his past"—and then it grew. It is a comedy, Harling says, because "even in the darkest hours there's stuff that makes you giggle."

December 3, 2012 marked the 25th birthday of the play. There are seventeen authorized translations of the play including Japanese, Chinese, French, Swedish, Spanish, and Italian.

Filmography:

Steel Magnolias producer (1989)

Soapdish screenplay (1991)

Coiffure pour dames writer (1992)

The First Wives Club screenplay (1996)

The Evening Star writer (1996)

Laws of Attraction screenplay (2004)

Robert is currently working on adapting *Soapdish* into a musical.

"Robert Harling (writer)." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 09 Aug. 2014. Web. 16 Sept. 2014.

"The Interview: Robert Harling." Garden & Gun. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Sept. 2014.

Hubbard, Kim. "Robert Harling, Author of a Hit Comedy Based on a Family Tragedy." *No Records*. People.com, 25 Jan. 1988. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

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Nathan, Sara. "'It Took the World's Biggest Movie Star to Play My Sister': Steel Magnolias Writer on the REAL Story behind the Hollywood Hit - and How Nervous Newcomer Julia Roberts Ate Burgers in His Backyard ." *Mail Online*. Associated Newspapers, 28 Mar. 2014. Web. 19 Sept. 2014. -"Robert Harling." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web.

Synopsis for *Steel Magnolias*

Act One, Scene 1

When the play opens, we are introduced to Truvy who is getting her hair done by Annelle. Annelle has recently finished beauty school and is seeking employment in Truvy's Salon. Seeing potential in Annelle, Truvy hires her. Then we meet Clairee, one of Truvy's customers, who is as curious as Truvy about Annelle's past. At this point it's clear Truvy and Clairee love to gossip a lot and Annelle leaves for the coffee.

Shelby arrives for her appointment with Truvy and we begin to see the dynamics of the relationships in the salon. Annelle is assigned to do the hair of the next client to arrive, M'Lynn. However, Annelle is apprehensive to doing the bride's mother's hair because she does not want to make any mistakes. It is clear that Shelby and M'Lynn have typical mother-daughter relationship. M'Lynn seems a little overbearing because she is worried about Shelby's health and well-being. The plot thickens as all the women uncover a secret about Shelby.

Shelby's focus remains on her big day as Ouiser Boudreaux enters the salon having a fit. Ouiser turns her attention to Annelle with the desire to find out some more information about her. Shelby then invites Annelle to the wedding and Truvy offers a very kind gesture to Annelle.

Act One, Scene 2

It's the Saturday before Christmas and a few months post the wedding. Shelby returns home with some shocking news, leaving everyone worried and M'Lynn in disagreement with Shelby. Annelle has found religion and taken up arts and crafts. Ouiser is upset about the townspeople and tourists parking in her yard for the festival. This causes her to be unconcerned with Shelby setting her up with Owen, an old flame of hers.

Act Two, Scene 1

One and a half years later we find the ladies in the salon, their usual gathering place, gossiping about the latest news. M'Lynn and Shelby have been at odds with most of Shelby's personal decisions. Although M'Lynn has made her

opinion known, by saying indirect comments, Shelby is going to live her life however it makes her happy. But Shelby does have a secret. She and her mother have been hiding something from the other women.

Act Two Scene 2

Annelle, who is experiencing a life-changing event, is styling Ouiser's hair. At the opening of the play, Annelle was quiet and secretive; however, she is open and in love now. M'Lynn enters the scene discussing Shelby's medical battles.

This scene showcases the growth of all the characters. Despite the serious and life-changing events in the characters' lives, the playwright shows that the bonds of friendships can withstand the storms of life with a bittersweet ending.

Director

For *Steel Magnolias* at the Alliance Theatre



The Alliance Theatre is proud to welcome Judith Ivey to the Alliance Theatre to direct *Steel Magnolias*. She was born September 4, 1951 in El Paso, Texas, to Dorothy Lee (Lewis), a teacher, and Nathan Aldean Ivey, a college instructor and dean. Judith graduated from Marion High School in Marion, Illinois in 1970, and studied acting at Illinois State University.

Ivey is a two time Broadway Tony Award winner for Best Actress. She won in 1983 for "Steaming" and in 1985 for David Rabe's "Hurlyburly." In addition to being a stage actress, Ivey is a film actress. Her film credits include *The Lonely Guy* (1984), *Sister, Sister* (1987), *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), and *Red Rose* (2002). One of her better-remembered TV roles was playing the Texan B.J. Poteet in the last season of *Designing Women* (1986) and the recurring role of Debra Messing's mother-in-law Eleanor Markus on *Will & Grace* (1998).

-IMDb Mini Biography By: tony.r.vario@gmail.com

Actors

For *Steel Magnolias* at the Alliance Theatre



Clairee is played by **Becky Ann Baker**
Broadway: *Good People*; TV: *Girls, Freaks and Geeks*



Ouiser is played by **Mary Pat Gleason**
TV: *Guiding Light*



Truvy is played by **Deirdre Lovejoy**
Notable TV/Film: Five seasons as Rhonda Pearlman on HBO's "*The Wire*", "*GIRLS*", "*Orange is the New Black*", "*Bones*" (The Gravedigger), "*Law & Order*" (all), *Step Up*.



M'Lynn is played by **Beth Broderick**
TV: "*Sabrina the Teenage Witch*", "*The Five Mrs. Buchannan's*," *Heart's Afire*" and "*Glory Days*". Beth recently finished filming, "*A Perfect Christmas*".



Annelle is played by **Sarah Stiles**
Broadway: *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*



Shelby is played by **Zoe Winters**
Off-Broadway: *4000 Miles*, *Much Ado About Nothing*

Original Cast Members

Opening US Cast (1987)

- Margo Marindale as Truvy
- Constance Shulman as Annelle
- Kate Wilkinson as Clairee
- Mary Fogarty as Ouiser
- Blanche Baker as Shelby
- Rosemary Prinz as M'Lynn

Changes: Betsy Aidem took over the role of Shelby, and notable replacements included Stacy Ray as Shelby, Rita Gardner as M'Lynn and Anne Pitoniak as Ouiser

Broadway Production

- Delta Burke as Truvy
- Christine Ebersole as M'Lynn
- Rebecca Gayheart as Shelby
- Marsha Mason as Ouiser
- Lily Rabe as Annelle
- Frances Sternhagen as Clairee

Steel Magnolias Characters

Truvy Jones

Truvy is in her late thirties to forties and owns a hair salon that is the setting for the play. It is clear that she is vain because of the references she makes about how there is no natural beauty. She is a gossip and loves to be in everyone's personal affairs. Truvy is a beautician and loves being in control of whatever the situation may be. Her two sons are Louie, who attends Louisiana State University, and Poot, who is to work with her cousin in Baltimore. She is married to a man named Spud Jones who she describes as a lazy old man. Truvy considers Annelle as a daughter even though they are not related. She also loves listening to others people's romantic experiences.

Annelle Dupuy-Desoto

Annelle is thought to be eighteen to twenty five. She is new in town and began to work for Truvy because of her need for money. Annelle is a shy and creative individual. She refrains from discussing her life. She does not have a lot of money so she lives in a Ruth Robeline's boarding house and works as a beautician at Truvy's salon because she went to a trade school for cosmetology. She is kind and gracious towards the woman she meets in the beauty salon.

Shelby Eatenton-Latcherie

Shelby, the youngest female in the play (approximately seventeen to twenty-one years old), is the daughter of M'Lynn Eatenton. She is about to get married to Jackson Latcherie. She has diabetes, but does not want her medical background to define her as a person because she does not want to rely on others. She is a pediatric nurse and she wants to have children. However, it is not recommended for her to have children because of her medical conditions. She has a very youthful feel to her, almost described as child-like. She is seen this way because of the types of hairstyles and colors she chooses to define herself. She wants to have a very romantic and peaceful marriage instead of the hectic relationship that her parents have.

Ouiser Bourdeaux

Ouiser is an older woman in her late fifties to early sixties. She is seen as bitter and annoyed most of the time. She has a dislike towards Drum Eatenton. In her life, the things she values the most are her dog Rhett and her property. She is constantly arguing with M'Lynn's husband Drum over property but does have a deep concern with Shelby like all other characters. Even though she speaks poorly to the other women sometimes, she still considers them as her closest companion. She has been married twice and has children.

M'Lynn Eatenton

M'Lynn is the mother of Shelby and of two sons named Tommy and Jonathan. She is around 40 years old. She is also the wife of Drum Eatenton, who she believes is crazy. Her main priority would be her daughter Shelby; she takes great care of her daughter due to her medical issues so she is seen as overprotective. On the surface, she is seen as strong and collective, but deep down she is fragile.

Clairee Belcher

Clairee is the widow of a mayor and the administrator of the Mental Guidance Center. She is seen to be in her late fifties to sixties like Ouiser. She is known for her smart mouth and sweet tooth. Even though she puts herself down quite a lot, she always remains playful when a serious topic arises. Out of all the women, she is the only one without any children but she has close ties with her relatives.

Steel Magnolias Places

Chinquapin

- Harling uses a fictional setting for the play - Chinquapin, a town in northwest Louisiana.

(<http://www.accenthelp.com/blogs/accenthelpblog/6936114-steel-magnolias-accents>)

Natchitoches, Louisiana

- This is where the film version of Steel Magnolias took place.
- This is also where the writer of the play hometown was.
- " Harling was born and raised in Natchitoches (pronounced *NACK-uh-dish*), and the play is partially based on the events surrounding his sister's death and on the people he knew in his hometown"

Truvy's Beauty Salon

- Even though it was a fictional setting, it was still a big part in play, because of the fact that that's where most of it took place.
- Took place in the fictional town of Chinquapin.

Hair Salon Culture

There is a huge difference between black and white hair salons in the 80s, from the hairstyles to the tools they use while doing their client's hair. Below are pictures of hairstyles from the 1980s as an example of how the characters in the play might be styled.



Source:

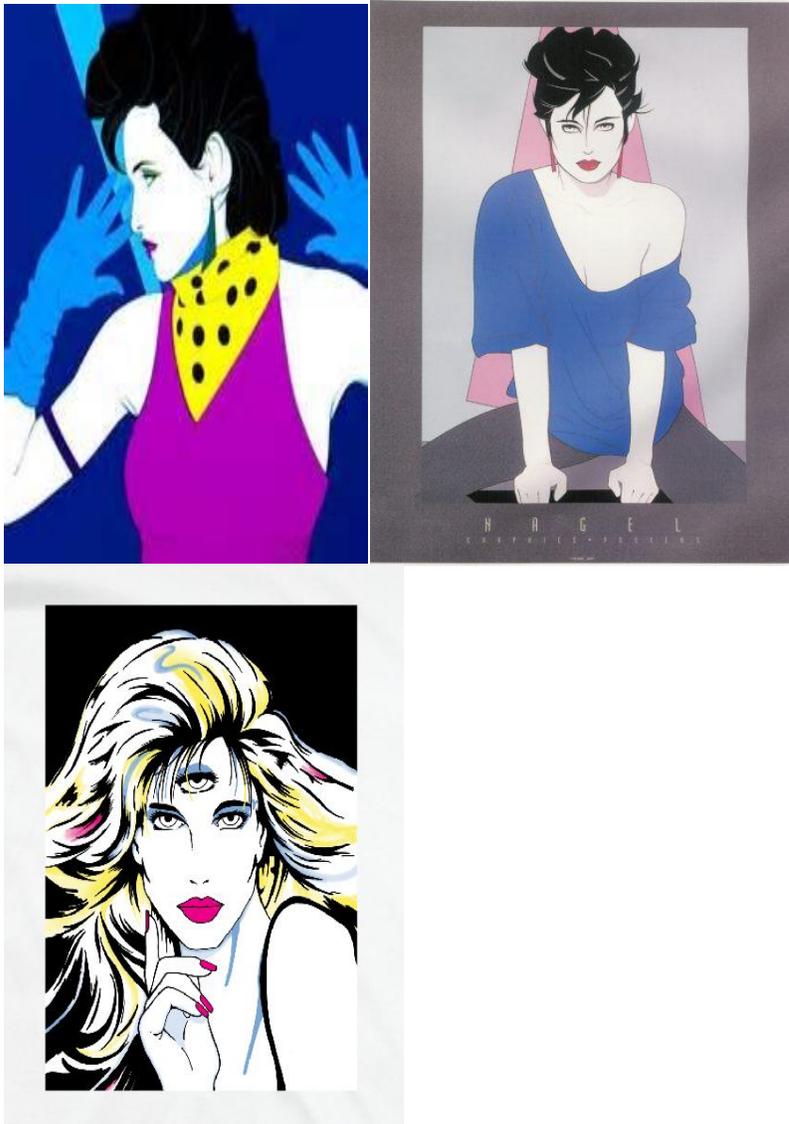
Left photo- <https://fanart.tv/series/79172/saved-by-the-bell/>

Right photo- <http://mediumhairstyleupdate.com/80s-hairstyles-for-women.html>

Hairspray was a staple product during this time period. Stylists also used combs to tease their hair to get a fuller and voluminous look. According to liketotally80s.com, the most popular hairstyles were: the side ponytail, the big perm, big bangs, crimping, and etc. What was very popular then and still being used

today is mousse, which was used in styling someone's hair and resulting in a shiny look with a lot of volume.

As in the play, some beauty salons were run out of their homes. The artwork in that time was also posted and shown in the salons, which is very essential to the style of the salon itself. A famous artist of that time was Patrick Nagel who created these photos below.



Source:

Right- <http://pinterest.com>

Center- <http://qtpi1969.net/memories/patrick-nagel-the-art-history-archive-contemporary-art/>

Left- <http://commodore.bigcartel.com/product/the-20-eyes-tee-in-white>

Events and References made in *Steel Magnolias*

Princess Diana

- Wife to prince Charles
- Adored by the public
- Died trying to escape the paparazzi
- Died August 31, 1997



Elizabeth Taylor

- Successful actress
- Married many of her co-stars
- Married eight times
- She had many health problems
- She died at 79
- She died on March 23, 2011



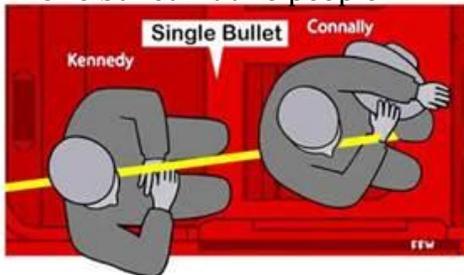
Princess Grace

- Successful actress
- Princess of Monaco
- Married the princes of Monaco Prince Rainer 3rd



Single Bullet Theory

- Only one bullet was shot at JFK
- Conspiracy theory
- One bullet hit two people



Cajun Cuisine

- In Southern Louisiana, the Cajun cuisine is influenced by French culture.
- The style of cooking is known for boiling seafood and having soup style and spicy dishes.
- Cajun is a name for French-speaking Acadians that migrated from Acadia, Canada to Louisiana.



Steel Magnolias
Health Information

Diabetes

Diabetes is a disease that causes the body not to be able to produce or properly use insulin. Scientists have not yet discovered the cause of Diabetes.

There are three types of Diabetes

- Type 1- disease that starts when the pancreas stop making insulin.
- Type 2 - disease that happens when the cells in the body can't use insulin the right way
- Gestational Diabetes – this is the temporary form of insulin resistance that usually occurs halfway through pregnancy

Statistics about diabetes

Diabetes: Risks in pregnancy

Having diabetes during pregnancy can increase the chances of developing preeclampsia and depression.

Preeclampsia: A condition in which you develop high blood pressure and too much protein in the urine during the second half of pregnancy.

Depression: Makes you too tired to manage your diabetes and care for yourself or a child.

When you are pregnant, you're at increased risk of having low blood glucose, also called hypoglycemia.

Symptoms of Low Blood Glucose

- Hungry
- Dizzy or Shaky
- Confused
- Pale
- Sweaty
- Weak
- Cranky
- Headaches
- Fast Heartbeat

Low Blood Glucose Can Be Caused By

- Meals or snacks that are too small, delayed, or skipped

- High doses of insulin
- Increased physical activity
- Consumption of alcohol

High blood glucose, also called hyperglycemia, can happen when you don't have enough insulin or when your body isn't able to use insulin correctly.

Results from:

- Not taking your medication
- Eating more than usual
- Being less active than usual
- Illness
- Stress
- Frequent urination
- Thirst
- Weight loss

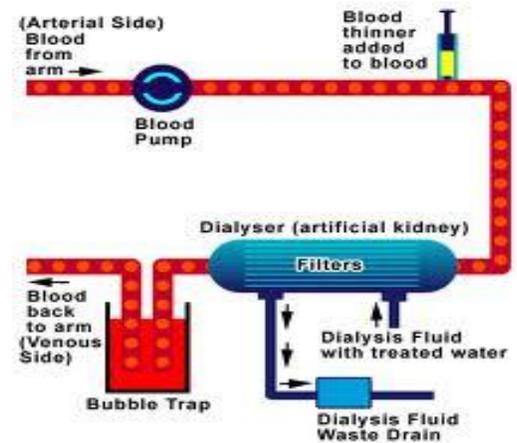
Dialysis

Dialysis is a process for removing waste and excess water from the blood and is used primarily as an article replacement for lost kidney functions.

(The kidneys are two bean-shaped organs, each about the size of a fist. They are located just below the rib cage, one on each side of the spine. Every day, the two kidneys filter about 120 to 150 quarts of blood to produce about 1 to 2 quarts of urine, composed of wastes and extra fluid)

Kidney dialysis is a life-support treatment that uses a special machine to filter harmful wastes, salts, and excess fluid from your blood.

Patients usually require dialysis when the waste products in their body become so high that they become ill.



Sources

<http://www.kidney.org/news/newsroom/factsheets/FastFacts.cfm>
<http://www.diabetes.niddk.nih.gov/dm/pubs/pregnancy/>
<http://www.pamf.org/diabetes/whatis/>

Act I, Scene 1: Words and Phrases

Child Bride (n.) – A young bride married for circumstances of poverty, bride price, dowry, and cultural traditions

Pretentious (adj.) - Trying to show off

Coiffure /kwä 'fyoör/ (n.) – French word for hairdo

Boarding House (n.) – A house providing food and lodging for paying guest

Carport (n.) – Garage without a closing door

Bunkie (v.) – To sneak

To do a bunk / to sneak away

Collie /kälē/ (n.) – A sheepdog of a breed originating in Scotland, having a long, pointed nose and thick, long hair



Profusely (adv.) – abundantly

Act I scene ii Words and Phrases

Spit nails (v.) - To speak or behave in a way that shows you are very angry

Spoolies (n.) - A hair curler used in the late sixties to make ringlets in hair

Nativity (n.)- Jesus' birth

Jezebel (n.)- A character in the Bible that was a killer and a prostitute. It is also a woman regarded as evil and scheming.

Color announcer (n.) - A sports commentator who assist the play-by-play announcer

“Empty is the head that wears the crown”- When someone of a higher quality is not smart. This phrase comes from the Shakespearean quote, “uneasy lies the head that wears the crown”, from Act 3, scene 1 of “Henry IV” which means that it is a big responsibility to be King.

Soup to Nuts- From beginning to end

Earping (v.) - To do something inappropriate

Unrequited Love- A situation in which love is not returned

Feelers (n.) - A tentative proposal intended to win over someone's attitude or opinion

Act II Scene 2 Words and Phrases

Track lighting (n.) - For a room or other area in which individual spotlight fixtures are attached along a narrow wall

Foyer (n.) - An entrance hall of other open area in a building used by the public, especially a hotel or theater

Pate (n.) - A meat paste; a small pastry filled with meat or fish

Epitome (n.) – A brief summary

Harelip (n.) - Used as an offensive term in play; it is a split in the upper lip on one or both sides of the center



Sleazy (adj.) - Shabby, dirty, or vulgar; dishonest or corrupt

Rambunctious (adj.) - Lacking in restraint or discipline

Valium (n.) - Drug tranquilizer

“Cut the feet out of your stockings” - Because there is a hole in your stockings, your wishes or desires keep falling, which always leads you wanting more.

“A dirty mind is a terrible thing to waste” - Used in an amusing way to the original quote, “A mind is a terrible thing to waste” from Malcolm X.

Act II, Scene ii

Preempted (v.) - To prevent something anticipated

Anesthetic (n.) - A substance that puts you asleep

ICU - Intensive care unit (*ICU*) for patients with life-threatening medical conditions.

“...a hop, skip and a jump” – It is far but not far.

“I wasn’t in the mood to play bridge” – Bridge is a classic card game.

Sources: www.dictionary.com,

<http://www.jacksonvilleu.com/resources/career/icu-nurse-salary-job-description/>

Pre-Show Questions

1. Does anyone in your family have an illness? If so, explain how your family takes care of them. Is your family overprotective or injurious?
2. Have you ever argument with a friend that later seemed frivolous in light of all you two had been through? What was the conflict about and how was it resolved?
3. Why it is that close bonds are created in a barbershop or beauty salon?

Post-Show Questions

1. What is the significance of the title, *Steel Magnolias*, to the play?
2. In the play, Shelby brought a dysfunctional radio to the salon. How does the radio symbolize Shelby?
3. During the play, what changes did you see in Annelle?
4. Children and parents often have disagreements. Can you relate to the relationship between Shelby and M'Lynn even at your age? What are some situations in which you don't see eye to eye with your parents?

Creative Writing Prompts

1. In the play, Shelby does something that M'Lynn doesn't agree with. What personal connections can you make to this event?
2. Illnesses are usually seen as negative occurrence. How might a person grow or become a better person when dealing with an illness or supporting a loved one who is ill?
3. What personal connections can you make with the title of the play?