

Steel Magnolias ★★★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Steel Magnolias must have been a casting director's wet dream! Try this on for size: Sally Fields, Shirley MacLaine, Olympia Dukakis, Daryl Hannah, Dolly Parton, and Julia Roberts all together in one movie. Collectively, these actresses have so much charisma that *Steel Magnolias* manages to escape without serious injury from a potentially fatal case of tear-jerking.

The movie clicks thanks to the warm camaraderie between the cast members. The story revolves around Roberts as a diabetic who decides to risk her life by getting pregnant. Fields is Roberts' over-protective mother in a flashy role which requires the actress to pour on the pathos. MacLaine is a riot as a cranky eccentric who claims to have been in a bad mood for 40 years. Dukakis is the fun-loving widow who enjoys exchanging insults with MacLaine. They all hang out and gossip at Dolly Parton's beauty salon.

The actresses are working with an exceptionally clever script, which contains some of the year's funniest one-liners. In fact, Gene Siskel has dismissed the film as "Southern Belles doing stand-up." But when you're rolling in the aisles, who

cares if the dialogue is unrealistic? Robert Harling's script revels in the absurd idiosyncrasies of life in a small town.

Steel Magnolias is a movie of minor miracles, not the least of which is a shockingly good performance by Hannah, who is usually my least favorite actress on the planet. Hannah plays the new girl in town, and her schizophrenic character starts out as a timid nerd with funny glasses and evolves into a kooky, born-again, religious fanatic with funny glasses. Maybe Hollywood executives now will finally realize that they've been miscasting Hannah all these years. Forget the glamour roles; give this babe the weirdo parts!

Regrettably, Hannah and her "sisters" are merely caricatures. You don't know them intimately, and consequently, the dramatic moments just don't ring true. The tear-jerking gets completely out of hand during the climactic funeral scene: the emotions seem forced as Fields alternates between gushing tears and hysterical laughter. Fortunately, the movie's comic undercurrent resurfaces just in time to rescue us from the jaws of melodrama.