

‘Steel Magnolias’ jumps off the big screen to Crescent City stage

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Darkness surrounds the actors as they await the call in the wings, palms sweating. The stage light dims and the audience hushes.

“Places!”

The stage is set for an intimate hair salon in a small southern town. It’s showtime.

“Steel Magnolias” opened at the Lighthouse Repertory Theatre on Friday and runs through Oct. 27, bringing a tale of female resilience and community to Crescent City.

This will be the second time the Lighthouse Repertory Theatre has hosted a performance of “Steel Magnolias” in its 42 years.

Directed by Kurt Kurtis, six local thespians bring to life the story of a band of Southern belles and the difficulty one of them faces with diabetes. “Steel Magnolias,” written by Robert Harling in 1987 and made into a film in 1989, is based on the life of Harling’s sister, who passed away from diabetes.

“A lot of plays, they don’t have quite as much dynamic to them as this one does,” said Kjirsten Kime, who plays Shelby Eatenton Lacherie, the character depicting Harling’s sister.

Kurtis chose the show because the movie celebrated its 30th anniversary in May this year when it returned briefly to movie theaters across the country. While Kurtis and the cast members enjoy the movie, they want to distinguish their production from the beloved big-screen version.

Kurtis wanted his actors to have the freedom of character creation without feeling daunted by the movie's big-name actors. So from the start, he decided to make the set feel and look different from the movie's.

"The actors try to create their own characters and not try to do a carbon copy of the movie, because everyone's seen the movie and it's different than the play and these aren't those actors," Kurtis said.

While the movie has several male actors in supporting roles, the play follows only female characters, though a DJ's male voice plays occasionally. This dynamic makes for a close-knit cast with a family-like feel. Some of the younger thespians even refer to their newest member as a mother figure.

"(The actresses) have been really good ladies and very patient with a new person. I have to say that about these guys. I couldn't have asked for a better cast to work with," said Kathy Dagnault, who is making her local debut as Truvy Jones.

Additionally, the actors agree this show allows them to portray six strong and varying female characters. "It's a bunch of strong women, all strong in different ways, but they all come together to support each other, and I think that's the message that the show has, is that we come together and support one another," said Shirley Keys, who plays the part of Ouiser Boudreaux.

Throughout the pre-production, they have come to love their characters and the narrative they play out, and they believe the show offers entertainment that suits everyone's likes.

"There's a little bit of everything for everybody. There's some sad if you want to see some sad, pulling at the heartstrings. There's a lot of humor," said Cassidy Chase, who plays Annelle Dupuy-Desoto and has appeared in more than 20 shows at the Lighthouse Repertory Theatre.

They said they hope for a big turnout, as they have spent nearly five nights each week since late August perfecting the lines and enhancing the characters.