

JOYCE MCMILLAN on STEEL MAGNOLIAS at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, for Scotsman Arts, 8.7.10

Steel Magnolias 3 stars ***

Robert Harling's Steel Magnolias – famous for that 1989 film version starring Dolly Parton and Julia Roberts, and now revived in the tiny Tron Changing House by new Glasgow company Upstage Theatre – belongs to another grand old tradition of popular drama, featuring gay male empathy for strong women in tough situations. Set in Truvy Jones's hair salon in a small town in Louisiana, Harling's story lays on the schmaltz, as it shows its cast of six women – including Truvy herself, her born-again assistant Annelle, her best customer M'Lynn, and M'Lynn's lovely but fragile daughter Shelby – helping each other survive some of the toughest stuff life can throw at us, from raw bereavement to the loneliness of old age.

For all its wordy sentimentality, though, Steel Magnolias is also shgarp-witted, good-hearted, and sometimes fiercely accurate in its understanding of the quiet depths of female solidarity; oddly, it sometimes seemed to me like a Deep South version of Tony Roper's The Steamie, with its emphasis on women coming together amid the splash of water and detergents to talk through their imperfect lives and unhappy marriages, and give each other strength. In the confined space of the Changing House, this big play – with a vivid naturalistic set by Peter Screen – generates sauna-like levels of heat; and the acting in Angela Darcy's production is sometimes a little uneven and old-fashioned, with too much hand-waving.

Yet Isabel Joss turns in a very fine performance as Truvy, the hard-working lincchpin of this little community, with Lucy Mills in frightening form as Annelle, the chubby assistant who falls prey to a scarily unhelpful form of Christian fundamentalism. And although Carmen Pieraccini, as Shelby, only has to appear pretty, lively and poignantly vulnerable, she brings real depth and thought to the job; helping to create a show that has already established itself as a small-scale treat on the girls' night out circuit, and which should, if there's any justice, have a fine future ahead of it.

Steel Magnolias is at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, until Saturday, 10 July.