

# 'Steel Magnolias' really blossoms on the screen

## Entertainment

### FILMETER



ROBERT DIMATTEO

In Movie Theaters

**STEEL MAGNOLIAS (PG)** Movies often work on very basic levels: We enjoy the actors, or the story, or the fact that there are a few good jokes to chortle over afterward. This adaptation of Robert Harling's off-Broadway hit is a perfect example of the movie that fails on its most serious terms, but is still entertaining and worth seeing anyway.

It's a comedy/tear-jerker about six Louisiana belles who congregate in a local beauty parlor, where they trade quips and face life's tragedies together. Imagine a blend of "Designing Women" and "Terms of Endearment," and you've got the gist of this Herbert Ross-directed movie.

The movie proves that Ross ("The Turning Point") may be as close to a contemporary George Cukor as we've got. Cukor was the epitome of what used to be called a "women's picture" director. In movies like "The Chapman Report," he revealed a speciality for splashy emotions and florid-verging-on-camp stylistics.

With Harling's script to buttress him, Ross' work here is in the same Cukoresque mold. He doesn't hold back; the film is, for the most part, confidently overblown. You'd have to be pretty naive to think that a real Louisiana beauty parlor is like the endlessly gossipy one in this movie — with its inhabitants who sometimes seem more like drag queens than flesh-and-blood women. (Not for nothing has the play been running in Greenwich Village on oh-so-gay Christopher Street.) Remember the phrase "sisterhood is powerful"? Well, "Steel Magnolias" might be described as "sisterhood is bitchy."

Still, this synthetic Southern kitsch is reasonably lively, and the cast is a kaffeeklatsch of some of the top women in American movies. Sally Field and Julia Roberts make a surprisingly touching mother-daughter team; Dolly Parton is simply delicious as the proprietor of the beauty parlor; Shirley MacLaine is amusingly feisty (if bizarrely made-up) as the town's rich eccentric; and Daryl Hannah shows that she really can act in the

role of a dizzy, fledgling beautician who prays all the time. And, though she seems about as Southern as Bella Abzug, Olympia Dukakis' acerbic old dame has some of the best lines. ("The only thing that separates us from the animals is our ability to accessorize," she says at one point, bringing down the house.)

The Field-Roberts relationship is the catalyst for the movie's turn toward melodrama, after which point we're encouraged to cry our eyes out. Sentimentalists will defend the all-stops-pulled climactic scenes, pointing to Sally Field's graveyard breakdown scene, which almost redeems the movie's rather transparent effort to be tragic. In recent roles (like "Punchline"), Field has been a bit of a pain, but here she goes deeper emotionally than she has in years — maybe since "Sybil." **GRADE: ★★★**

**BACK TO THE FUTURE PART II (PG)** Don't expect an encapsulation of the plot here. This sequel to the enormously popular and genuinely charming time-travel movie is far too clever for its own good. It seems to be an instance of moviemakers getting carried away with their own inventiveness and losing track of how a picture will play for an audience.

Michael J. Fox and Lea Thompson are still appealing, and wild-and-wooly Christopher Lloyd has his deranged moments, but the movie is half-incoherent, and at least half-annoying. It seems to be designed for high-tech-loving overgrown kids who can gasp over the tricks. However, it's a strain to figure out who is who and whether a scene is in the past or the future. Some people may decide they're merely watching a baroque, inbred, heartless fiasco, and long to leave. **GRADE: ★½**



DOLLY PARTON plays beauty shop owner Truvy Jones who discusses goings-on at their friend's wedding with Clairee Belcher (Olympia Dukakis) in Herbert Ross's film of the hit play "Steel Magnolias."

New Home Video

**BATMAN (R)** Warner. The rare movie that is better — and darker — than all the endless hype would indicate. No, it's not a warm, Spielbergian entertainment. But some of us love this film's pop Wagnerian mood and look — its surging, cartoon nihilism. On video, you can savor Michael Keaton's undervalued performance in the title role, and continue to giggle at Nicholson's classic, creepy Joker. **GRADE: ★★★★★**

(Film grading: ★★★★★ — excellent, ★★★★★ — good, ★★★★★ — fair, ★ — poor)

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**TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS:** Kurt Waldheim (1918-), Austrian leader; Paul Winchell (1922-), ventriloquist; Phil Donahue (1935-), TV personality; Jane Fonda (1937-), actress; Frank Zappa (1940-), singer; Chris Evert (1954-), tennis player.

**TODAY'S QUOTE:** "In order to keep this feather in the air — and that's what it is — my people have to stay on

fire creatively." — Phil Donahue, on moving his long-running interview show from Chicago to New York.

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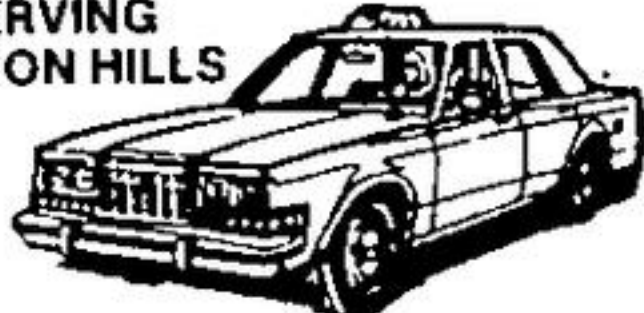
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