

ARTS

A 'perfect' cast at Dayton's Loft Theatre as Human Race stages *Steel Magnolias*

The power of the arts. The power of theater. November 13th marked the ultimate Friday the 13th. The multiple attacks in Paris, by terrorists bent on death to innocents and threats to freedom, jarred our already frayed sensibilities. How can we prevent these horrible events in a free society?

I have no answer to this ques-

tion. I have an observation that reflects the strength of a free society and the forces for good that can overcome evil. We went to see the Human Race production of the delightful family play, *Steel Magnolias*. The family, in this case, were the habitués of Truvy's Beauty Shop in semi-rural Louisiana.

Burt Saidel



The magic of theater was that this charming study of real, and lovable, characters was able to erase the deep depression of the evil events that occurred that very day. It did not remove the evil, but it filled us with hope and the expectation that this story, so brilliantly unfolded by a cast of wonderful actors, was a harbinger that bright days would return. It testified that the evil-doers would be confounded by our sharing of works of theatrical art.

Steel Magnolias is a well-crafted play that belongs on a stage. The film overdid the pith and moment of the characterizations and created an emotional mush. The play, and this cast, gave us the premiere presentation of several we have seen in the past. It made each character appear well-rounded and growing throughout the poignant story.

One of the joys of attending the Human Race is to enter the theater and see the set completely revealed. For *Steel Magnolias*, the re-creation of a beauty shop, a mystery to most men, was a revelation. Scenic designer Eric Moore captured the charm of these "girl caves" perfectly.

The cast, directed by Heather N. Powell in her Loft theatre debut, can only be described as perfect. The fact that several members are personal friends did not influence my opinion. The flow of humor, meaning, emotion and message bathed the audience in delight. That established my opinion.

Six women, as different as the planets of the solar system, each rule their part of the play. Beauty shop owner Truvy, whose mantra is "there is no such thing as natural beauty," was given life by Christine Brunner. She was unrecognizable

in a wig, big hair, of course, and a devotion to the art of hairdos.

Pat Linhart is one of the most accomplished artists I know. She is an operatic and popular singer, actor, and natural beauty that transcends decades. She was the widow of the ex-mayor of the town and its chief football fan. Full of rich privilege, cloaked in elegance, she was always a sincere friend.

Debuts included Maretta Zilic, the new hire at the shop who strove to live up to its history. Her innate charm, enhanced by zany costumes, made her lovable. Carolyn Popp became the mother of the pivotal character, Shelby. She was able to express the constant war between mother and daughter over every aspect of their lives, always with love.

As her daughter, natural beauty Julia Geisler created the role of manufactured beauty, Shelby. Shelby is a diabetic. She is getting married to an adequate groom. Shelby is the center of the shop's attention in the pre-wedding activities and in later acts, to her married life, her ill-advised motherhood and its fatal complications.

The most amazing characterization was Ouiser. She is self-described as being in a bad mood - for 40 years. To make Ouiser live fully-rounded, actor Caitlin Larsen Deer had to, again, become an entirely different person. And, she does it with such benevolent force that we are able to see the likable, even lovable person being portrayed.

We need, require, the joy of theater. We need, and require, the artistry of the Human Race Theatre Company. We are so fortunate to have them in our midst and among our friends. They are great artists who, on these dark days especially, dispel evil from our lives for a time.

The weekend continued. We were saturated by the news of the Paris attacks, a war on humanity

and on freedom. The center will not hold! We are all victims of this consummate evil. The attackers are seeking death, that of innocent others and their own.

Where is there a refuge? In the theater, and in the concert hall. Maestro Neal Gittleman had programmed a most unusual and beautiful program to commemorate Veteran's Day and the Dayton Peace Accords. Music is the food of peace. Even war-like strains are made peaceable by their intrinsic beauty.

When Neal and I discussed the Philharmonic season late in the summer, his enthusiasm was contagious. Resident conductor Stella Sung was revising an a cappella work into one for string orchestra and chorus, for a world premiere. The sung lyrics are from the Latin Mass, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, grant us peace.

I have come to love what I call the "Sung Sound." Each of Stella's works embodies intriguing sound combinations. In this one, the changing dynamics reflected the mood of those seeking peace.

This was followed by the Ohio premiere of a collaborative commission of six orchestras. *Dreams of the Fallen* follows a rich tradition, music and poetry combining to express complex emotions. None are as complex as those of soldiers facing death and striving for victory.

The elements: the orchestra, piano soloist Jeffrey Biegel, Hank Dahlman's Philharmonic Chorus and the words of poet Brian Turner. The music, beginning with dramatic atonal chords, coursed through powerful and sensitive passages that poignantly bathed the audience in complex emotions. The soldier is a hero, but the image of hero is changed. Now, survival is the issue. Dealing with random death from unseen sources is the burden of the soldier.

The piano was given synergistic and solo passages, played with artistry by Biegel. A long cadenza

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