



*Left: Clarinda Ross with Steel Magnolias Playwright Robert Harling*

## **That's What Friends Are For**

*For over two decades, Steel Magnolias has spelled "friendship" for RTC's Clarinda Ross, sometimes in very unexpected ways.*

It's well known that RTC is beloved among actors; thus many of our "alumni" jump at the chance to return, and frequently do so many times over. In fact, in the case of *Steel Magnolias*, we have a nearly "all alumni" cast, the only newcomer being the splendid Amy Handelman. With the exception of her role as Shelby, the entire cast has previously trod the RTC boards, many of them several times, a fact that equally pleases all involved.

There's another facet in repeat performances that sometimes plays out on Rubicon's stage, which is the same performer returning to a play after many intervening years - as with Anthony Haney's recent award-winning return to the character Sam in this season's "Master Harold"... and the boys. It can also happen that a performer returns to a well-loved play in a

different role - as this week's audiences are finding with Clarinda Ross, who's winning raves as Truvy in *Steel Magnolias*.

As it happens, *Steel Magnolias* was one of Clarinda's breakout roles some two decades ago, where she likewise garnered rave reviews, but as the play's emotional fulcrum Shelby - and some of the attention she won as Shelby struck right to the heart, as she recently recounted for RTC's James Scolari:

**RTC: So you have some terrific history with *Steel Magnolias*. Where does it begin?**

CR: It was 1987, the show had opened on Broadway, it had done very well, was a very big hit. The Alliance Theatre in Atlanta did the first regional production, and they cast me in the part of Shelby. So on opening night the playwright Robert Harling was there, his father was there, his mother, his aunts - all these people from Louisiana. After the show I'm there at the opening night party, wearing this pink lace dress that my Aunt had worn in the Miss Georgia Pageant - all pink and blonde, Shelby to a "T." More than I actually knew, because Robert Harling Sr., the playwright's father, found me in this crowd of people - and he came up and he held my face in his hands and he said, "You are so like her." He's very emotional: this was his daughter who passed away, her story inspired the play. I was twenty-six years old and it just ran through my heart; I knew something had passed between us in that moment, and I wanted to give him something, us standing there in the middle of



hundreds of people, something to honor that sudden bond. I had just found out that I was pregnant with my daughter Clara, so I leaned over and I whispered in his ear, "I'm pregnant." And his whole face just lit up; he was so emotional. Of course the thing with the character of Shelby is that she desperately wants to be pregnant, even at, as it turns out, great personal cost. So it was quite a little thing that passed between us. I never thought that I would ever see him again, sweet Mr. Harling, Sr. But that's not how it turned out...

So we did the show, we were a huge hit in Atlanta, then my dad passed away and Clara was born and afterward I got a call from the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas and they said, "We

heard you were a pretty good Shelby and we need a Shelby, would you come to Houston?" And I jumped at the chance to do the role again - after giving birth, I think my second act in Houston was deeper because I understood what Shelby was sacrificing to have this baby and of course I had lost my father, so in many ways the role had deepened for me.

Again the show was a huge hit, again they extended the run - and this was in the oil boom days - 1989, and we had big parties and we were the toast of the town. One night the stage manager told me, "There's a man waiting for you in the green room." And I went in and sure enough it was, Mr. Robert Harling Sr. the playwright's father.

Well, the moment I saw him it was like something just gave way and I just blurted out, "My daddy died!" And I just fell into his arms and sobbed.

He was by himself that night. He had driven seven hours from Natchitoches, Louisiana, their home town. He came by himself on that very long drive, he said that he wanted to see me again because I reminded him of his daughter Susan. I was so moved that he made that trip to see me, and of course he had had no idea that my dad passed away and all that had transpired in between two runs of that show.

**RTC: Gosh, so for you the show is special in more ways than one.**

CR: This show has always been special for me - it was the start of my career and I was very lucky to be working with such great actresses; I just learned so much from being around them. I was this really young actress just getting started, so instead of going to the green room I would just sit and watch these ladies, kind of soaking up their wisdom.

Those ladies became, and are still to this day, many of them, my dearest friends. When my father died they circled around me, these Magnolias, and got me through a very dark time. They were my group, my support system.

**RTC: I think there's something about this play; I think it has something to do with the intimacy, the very casual but very tangible intimacy between these friends, it has the ability to touch people, to speak to their own lives and evoke their own great friendships.**

CR: The play is so deceptive; on the one hand it's so very funny, but underneath it is a very real and tragic tale, and to me that's the thing that grounds it, that it's not just farce, it's not just gum smacking over the top, all of that stuff. It is grounded by the truth of this real story of Susan Harling.

**RTC: As you said when your father died and "the Magnolias" circled around you, that's what we do with people who are dear to us. As the old saying goes, "that's what friends are for."**

CR: I will never forget some of the phone calls or the letters - back when people used to actually write letters, rather than "email", you know? I still have some of the letters from them, where they talk about understanding the gravity of that loss and it was tremendous, and I remember thinking, "If I play my cards right, one of these days I'll get to play one of these other roles!" Move up the scale!



Alliance production 1988 Clarinda Ross as Shelby and (Tony nominee) Pam Burrell as M'Lynn

So I cannot tell you how excited I am to play Truvy. I hope I can be as good as my dear friend who did it in Atlanta, and who was simply brilliant. I definitely learned at the feet of the best and I hope I do them justice with this production. It was a great thing to be able to play Shelby twice; now I hope I'll just keep moving up the line! I'll never get to play young Annelle, but hopefully I can play everybody else; I've got a lot of good working years left, right?

**RTC: Right! This seems to be a theme this year in Rubicon, actors returning to parts or plays they have done before. Anthony Haney, for example, returned to play Sam in "Master Harold"... and the boys after a twenty-year hiatus.**

CR: I've had the opportunity to do this a few times in my career. Each time it's like a gift; the ability to play the same part again. This time it's a little different, since I'm playing a different part, but the play is comfortable for me. I wrote a letter to Mr. Harling, Jr., the playwright. I wanted to let him know I had connected with his father so long ago, and I said to him in the letter, "The play has come back to me like an old friend." And that's the way that I feel.

And the way it's come together, I think once again we pulled in real Magnolias; everybody seems to be meshing, there's not a bunch of ego crap going on. It's like we're all old friends, right from the start.

**RTC: Last time we saw you at Rubicon you were all alone, in the one-woman show *Spit Like a Big Girl*. What a kick to see you now working in the ensemble.**

CR: I'm in the ensemble, which I love. And I love playing Truvy; she's got such a big heart; she's such a mother, she's looking out for everybody. Even though she might not be as well-to-do or as educated as M'Lynn, they have a really close bond. It's a deep friendship.

**RTC: We seem to regard "friendship" in new ways in this age. I mean, I have over a thousand Facebook "friends"—of course, many of whom will never be true friends in any significant sense. It seems that in some ways our expectation that friendship brokers intimacy between people has become lost - maybe in that sense this play satisfies or resonates in this age more than ever before.**

CR: I think there's a real fondness - in the minds of people of a certain age - for the eighties. We were young, we were beautiful, there was money. And we're doing this play in period style, to a "T." There's something very sweet in the period - it was before the AIDS crisis, before these financial crises... and we're having fun with the styles, the big hair, the shoulder pads.

**RTC: This is actually rather a perfect show for the Rubicon feel - so populated with Rubicon "alumni."**

CR: I'm just thrilled to be a part of that club. The thing they do is make the experience so actor-friendly. Both Karyl Lynn and Jim are actors, so they know how it's supposed to work. Theatre is a "team sport;" we have to play well together - and (Director) Jenny (Sullivan) has really assembled some really fun people, also really talented actors, really right for the roles.

**RTC: And there's an added element in this show - you have be able to style hair onstage.**

CR: Yes! Both Angela and I are working on hair at several different points - we've had great fun. Jenny's joking with us, "Now if the acting thing doesn't work out, you have something to fall back on!"