



Back in bloom

That Southern grail of comedy, *Steel Magnolias*, is back—and on Broadway—with *Avenue Q*'s acclaimed out director in charge **By Michael Giltz**

The revival of *Steel Magnolias* at New York's Lyceum Theater promises a welcome contrast to current Broadway dramas like *Twelve Angry Men*. "We're the perfect antidote," quips out director Jason Moore. "We're *Six Happy Women*."

The play, a 1987 off-Broadway hit now making its Broadway debut, was penned in just 10 days by Louisiana playwright Robert Harling after his sister Susan died of complications from diabetes. It focuses on a group of women who gather in a beauty parlor, the one safe place where they can gripe about—and support each other through—marriages, illness, and death.

"I'm from Arkansas, and knowing these people and my mom being a single mother, it's what I come from," says Moore, 34. He also relates personally to the sense of loss that motivated Harling to write about his sister. "I had a brother who died in a car accident in a very shocking way," says Moore, "so the con-

cept of loss is always something I think a lot about."

Moore suffered a second loss when his mother died unexpectedly on the first day of rehearsals for *Avenue Q*, which he directed both off and on Broadway. Now he likes to remember that the film adaptation of *Magnolias* was one of his mother's favorites. "In terms of examining loss, [*Steel Magnolias*] is a really entertaining and heartening way of looking at it," he says.

The cast comprises Frances Sternhagen, Christine Ebersole, Rebecca Gayheart, Lily Rabe, Marsha Mason, and Delta Burke as beauty-shop owner Truvy (played by Dolly Parton in the movie). "I've never done much theater," Burke confesses. But she's clearly having a wonderful time working with Moore and Harling. "Gay men understand me better," she says.

Harling has shown his understanding of women in Hollywood hits like *The First Wives Club* and *Soapdish* (which

he's turning into a musical); he's now working on a big-screen version of *Dallas* and a project for Reese Witherspoon called *Sports Widow*. Indeed, says Harling, this revival gives him a chance to spotlight one woman friend in particular: "I've known Franny [Sternhagen] for years and years. It's always been a dream of mine to write something for Frances, and little did I realize I had!"

In the end it's that spirit of friendship that distinguishes *Steel Magnolias* from some of the comedies that came after. Although the play is famed for its one-liners ("The only thing that separates us from the animals is our ability to accessorize"), Moore is determined to keep the emotions real and not reduce the lives of these women to a wacky sitcom. How's that done, exactly? Moore laughs: "You stay away from garish oranges and pinks and really big hair and shoulder pads." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to periodicals including the New York Post.