

**Abingdon Theatre Company Commemorates STEEL MAGNOLIAS’  
30th Anniversary with Star-Studded, “Full Circle” Staged Reading**



Abingdon Theatre Company may be eight months into its landmark 26th year, but the roster of its glitzy, glittery, celebratory events is showing no signs of slowing down.

[After launching their latest season with another unforgettable bash](#), the acclaimed grassroots theatre company branched out with new programming, which included a unique One-Night-Only series. The brainchild of the company’s newly minted Artistic Director Chad Austin, the singular series aims to interpret both new and classic works in fresh and innovative new ways - with a dash, naturally, of theatrical star power - allowing its audience an altogether unmatched experience... offered, as the title suggests, for just “one night only.”

Now, following a successful launch last February with Wade Dooley’s THE PROMPTER, a premier production featuring the incomparable Estelle Parsons, the series is back with an equally standout sophomore event: a star-studded revamp of the classic STEEL MAGNOLIAS, in conjunction and commemoration with its film adaptation’s 30th anniversary.

Based on the true story of the sister of its writer, Robert Harling, the play is an exploration of strength, love, and friendship between women. Though the play chronicles the unique perspectives of six women, all united in equal parts fragility and grit, it’s clear, as the play goes on, the focus shifts mainly toward the young Shelby Eatenton Latcherie, whom all the ladies rally around when she, suffering from diabetes, makes a life-altering decision.

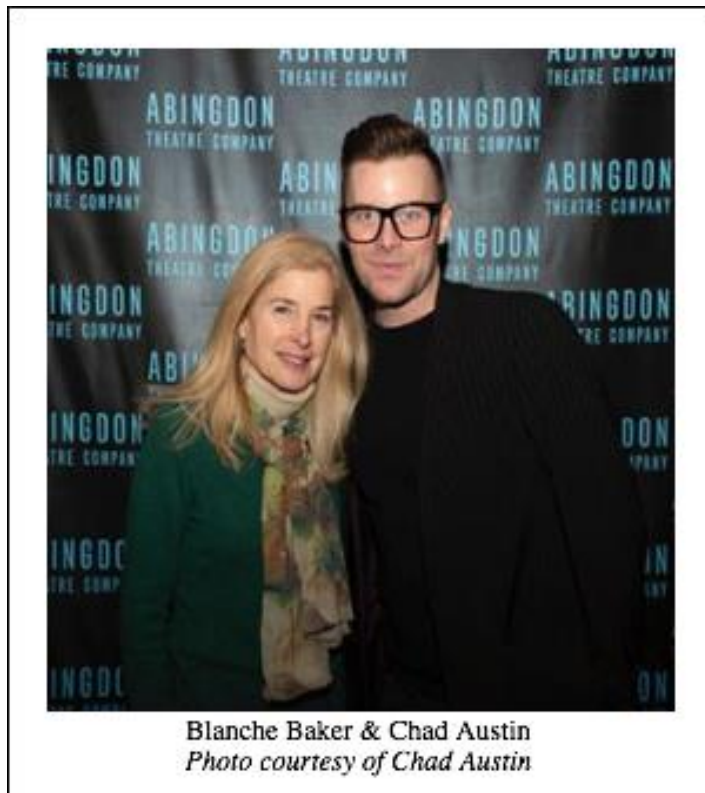
And, capitalizing on that very focus (while simultaneously -and admittedly - feeding his own desire for a lavish, star-studded spectacle), Austin recruited original 1987 Shelby, the Emmy-Award winning Blanche Baker, to helm the production.

“Blanche is not only a friend, but a brilliant storyteller,” Austin explains. “Apart from the obvious reasons that made her the perfect choice to direct this piece, she’s also just the most loving, truthful person, and she embodies all the themes of this work so fantastically. I was thrilled that she was able to say ‘yes’ and - yet again - bring this powerful story to life.”

Baker, for one, couldn’t be more pleased. “It’s such an excellent play addressing the fundamentals of human nature,” echoing the importance of such themes as equality, friendship, and strength. “No matter when the play was written, we can apply our own perspectives to those truths.” And, to that end, while she’s always been a proponent of women standing up for themselves no matter what, she notes, in light of recent events, the timeliness of this presentation, especially given its themes, is not lost on her: “Now - more than ever - is the time for women’s voices to be heard.”

Of course, on the other side of the spectrum, the evening is also noted for marking Baker’s return to the iconic production. And, in working on the material as closely as she has been, one might expect the experience to evoke a few memories of her time in the original show. “To be honest, [thinking back], I mostly remember a sleep-deprived whirlwind,” she says, with a laugh, explaining that her life was then consumed with two children under the age of three while tackling this massive role. Still, her storied history with the piece does allow her a unique perspective - one that hits her with passion and poignancy, as she approaches the production anew.

“It’s interesting to see the piece as a whole,” she says, adding that this particular stage-style reading also “frees the imagination of the audience,” allowing them, and the actors, in turn, to focus more closely on the nuances of the writing. “You come across things you might’ve missed as an actor, [when you might have been] focusing mainly on your own role.... and, given my role in this staged production, it’s nice, too, to watch a whole new group of actors experience the play, and bring to it their own individual and diverse perspectives.”



One such actor is Carrie St. Louis, who's slipping into the wedding dress of the delicate Shelby for the special performance. While she admits that taking on a role with which her director is synonymous is indeed nothing short of difficult, St. Louis acknowledges she's grateful to have had Baker in the room, offering her trust, guidance, and encouragement every step of the way.



“Blanche has been so incredibly supportive,” the actress says of her director. “She reminded me that I have everything I need to play this role...and really gave me the boost of confidence I needed to portray someone as special as Shelby.”

At the same time, Baker's nudged St. Louis to make the role her own - an assignment she's not only taken seriously, but seriously enjoyed taking on.

“I just love how genuine Shelby is. She has a huge heart and really just wants to experience life in its fullest capacity regardless of the cost.” The character has even rubbed off on St. Louis in her personal life. Referencing Shelby's line, “I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special,” St. Louis explains how the phrase now “keeps circling back in my head....It's a good reminder to keep my heart open and say ‘yes’ to all that life has to offer.”

In retrospect, it's a fitting metaphor for the evening as a whole, one which Austin mentions aligns with the mission of ATC, which “strives to present work that shines a light upon the human condition, reminding us all of our humanity, inside and out.”

No question STEEL MAGNOLIAS does the job. And to say Austin's ecstatic that it does would be an understatement.

“It's thrilling to bring these types of special events - in the fullest sense of the word - to the stage,” he exclaims, thanks, in part - he emphasizes to ensure it's acknowledged - to the donation of time and talent on the part of the actors. “I am amazed how artists in this community are so incredibly generous.” For that reason and more, “rediscovering this heartfelt, hilarious piece of theatre alongside these six stellar actors has been an absolute joy!”

Capping off all the excitement is a ringing endorsement from Harling himself - “I'm always happy when my sister's story can be used to support a worthy cause,” the playwright asserts, adding the factor of “original-lead-turned-director” makes the evening “extra special” - while mounting it all at the Lucille Lortel Theatre, MAGNOLIAS' original Off-Broadway birthplace, is just the cherry on the cake.

“It’s going to be a truly magical evening,” Austin concludes. Reiterating Baker’s earlier point, he emphasizes, “We need [presentations] like this now more than ever. And once again, the stars have aligned. It’s very ‘full-circle’ and special. Seriously... you’re in for a real treat.”

***STEEL MAGNOLIAS, presented as part of Abingdon Theatre Company’s One Night Only series, will take place at the Lucille Lortel Theatre (121 Christopher Street) on May 20th at 7pm. All proceeds will benefit the company directly. For tickets and/or more information, visit [www.abingdontheatre.org](http://www.abingdontheatre.org).***