

Marsha Mason

The Nature of Magnolias

by Iris Weiner

Spend five minutes with Marsha Mason, one of the most soft-spoken, patient actresses in New York, and you'd never guess that she's getting enormous laughs each night at the Lyceum Theatre for her role as the most grumpy and sarcastic of the six women in Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*. As Ouiser, Mason has perfected the scowl and sullen veneer that Shirley MacLaine made famous in Herb Ross' 1989 film. "I keep thinking, 'Oh my God, I'll have to get botox after this show is over!'" laughs Mason. "I'm starting to permanently get those furrowed brows and the downward-turned lips. I have to smile during the day so I can work those facial muscles."

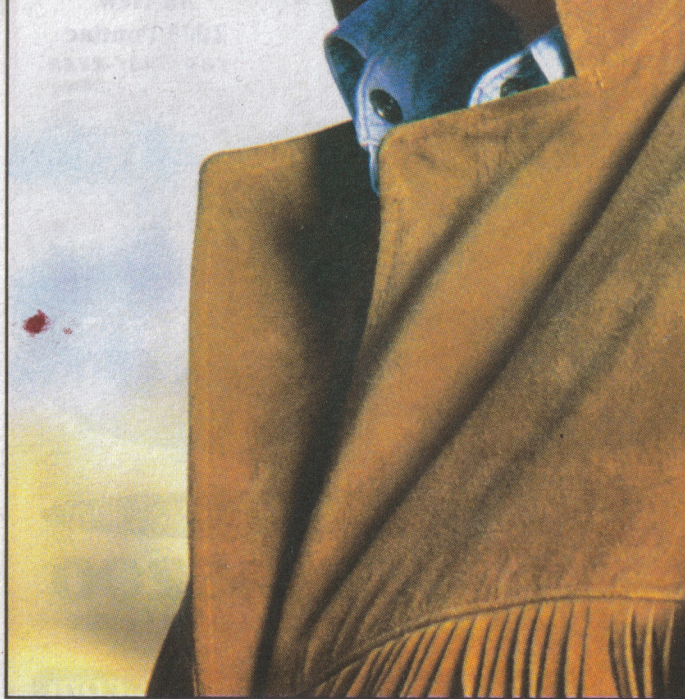
Whether or not you've caught a glimpse of a Mason smile in *Magnolias*, you've surely seen it in one of many other roles to which she has lent her unique talent. She's won two Golden Globes for performances in 1977's *The Goodbye Girl* and 1973's *Cinderella Liberty*, and has been nominated for four Academy Awards. In 1997, Mason received an Emmy nomination for her role as Sherry, Martin Crane's brash girlfriend on *Frasier*. From cult favorites (*Drop Dead Fred*) to acclaimed films (*Only When I Laugh*, *Chapter Two*), Mason continues to demonstrate her innate flexibility as an actress.

"I choose roles based on what sort of challenge I'm looking for at the moment," Mason says as she looks back on a rich career. "For example, after I got a nomination for *Cinderella Liberty*, it seemed like all the parts that were offered to me were victims, prostitutes, loser women, victimized women, women who cried ... I thought, 'I played



The production team for *Steel Magnolias* couldn't have had better timing when they approached Mason about playing one of the women in the play. "A lot of the reason why I'm doing *Steel Magnolias* is because of a conversation I had with a friend of mine, Shirley MacLaine. We were talking about the frustration of finding work that was interesting and challenging. She said one of the things that she had done was to move into character parts earlier than what her age was. When *Steel Magnolias* came up, I called her and said, 'Well, guess what I'm doing! I'm gonna play your part!'"

Both the producers and MacLaine immediately assumed Mason would be interested in playing M'Lynn, the sharp-witted concerned mother, or Clairee, the classy widow with a sharp sense of humor. "I said, 'I'm gonna do Ouiser, they won't expect me!' And, they didn't. I even had to come and audition, because everyone thought I'd be too nice." The rest of the cast filled out with Delta Burke, Christine Ebersole, Frances Sternhagen, Rebecca Gayheart and Lily Rabe. "When I first received the script, I thought, 'God, this is a strong play!' All of the women's characters have stage time, and they all are star parts."



Marsha Mason as Ouiser and Christine Ebersol as M'Lynn in *Steel Magnolias*



Marsha Mason

Meaty roles weren't easy to find when Mason was just starting out. She discovered acting in her freshman year of high school, despite the fact that her family always knew she was very dramatic. "They used to call me Sarah after Sarah Bernhardt when I was little, because I was so dramatic." After graduating in her home state of Missouri, she moved into a small apartment with a group of friends in New York in the 1960s. "My first work was in commercials, to try and earn a living so I wouldn't have to have a regular job," she smiles, remembering the 'regular' jobs she did end up with. "I sold coats, I worked for the New York Central Railroad, I was a go-go dancer in a lunch place that had dancers and swing over the bar for the men while they were having lunch."

Eventually, Mason was able to do summer stock and regional work. "I was very lucky because in 1971 I spent a whole season with A.C.T., which was a full-blown repertory company. I got some wonderful training there." Her hard work paid off in 1966 when she made her film debut in *Hot Rod Hullabaloo*.

When asked to choose which roles she would consider her top three, Mason once again deliberates over the most challenging pieces on her resume. "The most complicated and difficult part I ever played was in a play called *Amazing Grace*; it was based on a true story about a caregiver who killed 11 or 12 people. It had a kind of surreal tone and structure, so it was very complicated because it took you through her whole story." A self-proclaimed sucker for the classics, she credits roles in *Cyrano*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Crucible* as being favorites. "I loved playing Abigail in *The Crucible* because I really got to play somebody that I thought was evil." And of course, there's *Steal My*



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certified organic medicinal herb farm. Her love of nature led to the inception of *Resting in the River Organic Farm & Natural Products*, a complete line of herbal wellness sprays, nurturing salves, and bath and body items. "I actually have a full other life!" she says, beaming with pride. "You'll always find me out in the fields when I'm there. That's how the products actually got started! The first one was the salve, because I was complaining that my hands were terrible. And then, when I had to fly to L.A. or New York for acting work, I was tired of having farmer's hands. Gloves aren't always the easiest things to wear when you're out there."

Mason recommends some of her products for the busy Long Island woman. "The wellness sprays are all about helping to make your immune system strong. The Chill Factor is something to use when your mind is overactive and you're stressed to the max. The salve is for anybody who works with their hands a lot. Soon, we'll have a whole spa line coming out!"

But, Mason considers the life of any woman in 2005, and feels the best solution for stress doesn't come in a bottle. "Every woman should mark down one day every month where she gives herself the whole day. You get to do whatever you really want to do. Maybe it's just wandering around museums, or checking into a New York hotel. It should just be a break in your schedule, allowing you to feed your creative self."

Many times, Mason has given herself a day by visiting Long Island. "I've gone out to Long Island a lot over the years, it's beautiful and I love it. If ever I was going to make a shift and I was going to have to spend more time in the city, I would move out there. People are very lucky to live out there because they're surrounded

Monas. "I'm enjoying *Quiser* so much because of the nature of the character – she's such a grump. It gives me a chance to go out there every night and exercise timing."

When Mason isn't performing, she can be found at her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico, where she owns a

played that part, so why
should I do that again?"

by nature. You should always take advantage of the fact that you're in nature." ❖

*For tickets to Steel Magnolias, visit Telecharge.com.
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