

# 'Glad to be back home'

## Riverbend Players return to stage with 'Steel Magnolias'

BY MALLORY GRUBEN

Of all the Riverbend Players performances Margo McClellan has acted in since joining the theater group in 2018, none has felt quite as special as "Steel Magnolias."

The well-known dramatic comedy about the bond among a group of Southern women will mark a homecoming for McClellan and several other cast and crew mates working on the production in Nehalem. It will be their first time on stage for a live, in-person performance since the pandemic began.

Even after two successful virtual productions that helped raise more than \$10,000 to benefit local causes, McClellan said nothing can beat the feeling of getting back in front of an audience — especially after nearly two years away from it.

"I'm excited to be back. The stage is kind of like my second home," McClellan said.

### Going virtual

McClellan has acted in every play the Riverbend Players have produced in the last three years. That includes the two virtual productions the group held during the pandemic, when in-person performances were prohibited.

Jeff Slamal, treasurer for the Riverbend Players, said the theater group came up with the idea after learning of some very famous organizations that switched to digital performances to raise money during the COVID-19 shutdowns. The performers decided to give it a try for themselves.

Each virtual performance was aimed at raising money for a different local cause, and both productions included full costumes and sound effects.

Viewers watched via livestream at no charge, though the Riverbend Players collected voluntary donations for each production's respective cause.

McClellan likened the experience to a radio drama or reader's theater.

"It was fun, because ... there's no blocking, so you have more time to rehearse, and you can really get into the character," she said.

The virtual productions began with "It's a Wonderful Life," a holiday play that has appeared onstage at the Riverbend Players' home theater in the North Coast Rec-



Riverbend Players

**From left, actresses Margo McClellan, Linda Makohon, Emilee Andrade, Sue Neuer, Sharon Gavin and Julee Ward make up the cast of 'Steel Magnolias.'**

reation District several times.

The digital rendition garnered about 100 email addresses to view the show, which Slamal estimates translates to 150 to 200 total viewers.

Those supporters donated nearly \$7,300 during the performance. The money raised went to Fulcrum Community Resources, which used the money to provide COVID-19 business relief grants for businesses in the Nehalem area, Slamal said.

"The Dog Logs," a series of monologues from the canine perspective, also premiered digitally.

The performance collected donations for the North County Food Bank, Little Apple Fund and Nehalem United Methodist Church, three local groups focused on providing food to those in need.

Nearly as many people logged on to watch the live Facebook stream, and the production raised more than \$3,000 for its beneficiaries.

Slamal said the Riverbend Players did not expect the digital performances to be so successful, but the board and cast were thrilled with the result.

"At that time, there seemed to be a greater atmosphere of people wanting to help other people. Most of the funds raised came from local individuals," Slamal said. "It's a 'small town help thy

neighbor' situation."

The only drawback of the virtual plays was the lack of a live audience, Slamal said. Actors often rely on the energy and reactions of an audience, but there is no means of interaction during a digital stream.

"I act because I like the reaction from the audience," Slamal said. "The virtual plays we did went over really well, but we didn't get that reaction."

### Return to stage

Widespread access to vaccines for the virus and loosened state safety regulations allowed the Riverbend Players to bring their shows back to the main stage, starting with "Steel Magnolias."

Slamal, the director for the play, said he doesn't know quite what to expect for the first in-person performance the group has hosted since March 2020, but he's looking forward to providing the community with some long overdue live entertainment.

All of the actors were required to show proof of vaccination before accepting their roles. The cast and crew also keep a close eye on their health, always taking the night off if they feel at all ill.

"I appreciate the safety they've provided for us as actors here," said Sharon Gavin, who plays Clairee in the produc-

### 'Steel Magnolias'

Friday and Saturday, and Nov. 12 and 13 at 7 p.m.

Sunday and Nov. 14 at 1 p.m.

Advance tickets at [tickettomato.com](https://www.tickettomato.com), \$17

North County Recreation District

Performing Arts Center

36155 9th St. in Nehalem

Masks will be required for audiences inside the theater, except while eating or drinking in designated locations

tion. "They've been diligent to make a safe space for us to create in."

Of the six women performing in "Steel Magnolias," four are new faces to the Riverbend Players. However, two of the four newcomers — Emilee Andrade as Shelby and Sue Neuer as M'Lynn — are familiar to the North Coast theater scene, both having acted with the Coaster Theater Playhouse in Cannon Beach.

"I haven't been inside a theater in almost a year, a year and a half," said Andrade. "'Steel Magnolias' has always been a favorite close to my heart, because I am diabetic. ... Acting in this play is my way of showing that my diabetes didn't hold me back, even through the pandemic."

Ouiser is played by long-time Riverbend Players actor Linda Makohon, while Annelle is portrayed by first-time actor Julee Ward.

"This is my first stage play. I wanted to try something new, and I saw the ad for auditions on Facebook," Ward said. "I really appreciate that we can do this together safely."

The show opens Friday and runs for two weekends. Those who attend will be required to show proof of vaccination at the door, as well as wear a mask during the performance.

Slamal said the players have hired three times as many ushers as before the pandemic to make sure vaccination checks and seating go smoothly.

And if preshow ticket sales are any indicator, the show is likely to be one of the group's most popular yet. Slamal said sales are brisk and well over past, pre-COVID sales, with nearly 70 tickets called for already.

"The virtual productions were fun," he said. "But we are glad to be back home."