

Review: 'Always ... Patsy Cline' at Clarence Brown Theatre



Laura Beth Wells as Patsy Cline, Clarence Brown Theatre - Photo: Ella Marston

In case you haven't been paying attention, jukebox musicals are real crowd-pleasers. For example, *Ain't Too Proud*, the story of the Temptations, just finished a lengthy run on Broadway and has begun touring productions. *Jersey Boys*, a Tony-winning dramatization of the success of the Four Seasons, certainly comes to mind as well as notable vehicles like *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, and probably, dozens more. The engaging popular music is the essential attraction to the genre, but ultimately, a musical's long-term success depends, as in all of theatre, on its storytelling.

Storytelling is at the heart of *Always ... Patsy Cline*, a production of which opened last weekend at Clarence Brown Theatre. The two-character musical, created by Ted Swindley, first appeared off-Broadway in 1997, and has enjoyed a host of regional productions regularly ever since.

Thanks to films like *Sweet Dreams* with Jessica Lange as Patsy Cline, theatre-goers probably know a little of the background. Cline, born in Winchester, Va, in 1932, gained notoriety when she won a talent competition in 1957 and appeared on the Arthur Godfrey television show. Her success came relatively

fast, appearing at the Grand Ole Opry, and becoming associated with classic country hits such as “Crazy”, “Back in Baby’s Arms”, “I Fall to Pieces”, and “Sweet Dreams,” among many others. In 1963, at only the age of 30, she was killed in a small plane crash while flying home to Nashville after an engagement. Swindley based his two-character story on letters Cline sent to Louise Seger, an older Houston woman Cline had met at a local club and bonded with, and who became one of Cline’s biggest fans.



Deanna Surber as Louise Seger and Laura Beth Wells as Patsy Cline, CBT production of 'Always...Patsy Cline' – Photo: Ella Marston

In this decidedly entertaining CBT production directed by Terry D. Alford, the storytelling belongs to Deanna Surber as the narrator, the optimistically energetic, devoted, and determined fan, Louise Seger. Laura Beth Wells sings the role of Patsy Cline, capturing with stunningly beautiful accuracy in the show’s 27 musical numbers, the essence, edge, and depth of Cline’s voice and character—an amazing accomplishment and reason enough to catch this show.

Alford has crafted a marvelously tight, attractive production with the help of musical director and pianist Rhonda Mayfield, who leads a six-member, on-stage band: J Miller (drums), Greg Horne (steel guitar), Barry Hannah (guitar), Dave Peebles (bass), and Bethany Hankins (violin). Scenic designer Libby StadStad, along with lighting designer Helen Garcia-Alton, created a simple and versatile, but beautifully colorful and eye-catching stage space that is obviously comfortable and functional for the performers. Costume designer Lauren T. Roark has given Wells numerous surprising costume changes from western attire, to everyday ordinary, to country-sparkle elegance, all in a beautiful 60s period feel.

Swindley’s story structure allows for some “local” adaptation for Surber’s character as narrator to step downstage and address the audience directly — an attempt to break the fourth wall with some “down-home” chiding of the audience to provoke participation. For some audience members, this familiarity and participation will undeniably feel free, enjoyable, and fun; for others, maybe not so much. Knowing just how far to take such improvisation with the audience is a tough call.

This CBT production of *Always...Patsy Cline* continues Tuesday – Saturdays at 7:30 PM, Sundays at 2:00 PM; through May 15.