

Written by Mike Schulz

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It's easy to understand how, in a musical devoted to a famous recording artist, certain aspects of the performer's history will fall through the cracks. How do you comprehensively detail an artist's life - *anyone's* life - in the span of two hours? But until I saw the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse production of *Stand by Your Man: The Tammy Wynette Story*, I never experienced a musical biography that delivered too *much* information. Marriages, divorces, children, addiction, electro-shock, tabloid romances, a kidnapping attempt - the show is so chockablock with facts and minutiae that it's like the stage adaptation of Wynette's Wikipedia listing.

That being said, what's wonderful about Circa '21's presentation - directed by Michael Licata - is that the performers don't get bogged down in *Stand by Your Man's* relentless exposition and, in fact, *flourish* in it.

With the sheer volume of Wynette history presented here, Mark St. Germaine's script can only do so much to explain how all that history affects Wynette herself - we're given a lot of

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information *about* the singer but not much indication of who she *is*. It's up to Laura Hughes, playing Wynette, to fill in the emotional blanks, and the actress does so simply and often beautifully; Hughes manages to suggest depths to the character that the show itself barely hints at.

And, in a terrific surprise, she doesn't have to do it alone. Hughes is given enormous assistance by the production's talented ensemble - the majority of whom also compose the on-stage band - and by Larry Tobias, who plays Tammy's mentor and third husband George Jones and who gives one of the most singularly effective musical performances I've seen in years. It may be *The Tammy Wynette Story*, but as memorable as Tobias is here, you leave the theatre a little stunned that Jones' name didn't make its way into the title as well.

Vocally and instrumentally, Tobias is a spot-on George Jones, and his renditions of "Why Baby Why" and "The Race Is on" are especially thrilling. Yet this is more than mere impersonation - Tobias, in scene after scene, appears to reveal Jones' *soul*. We're never really privy to what makes the singer tick, but when Tobias stares at Hughes with heartfelt longing in their duet "We're Not the Jet Set" - it appears that he doesn't even

*blink*

- the force of Jones' sincerity is palpable; for a moment, you pray that

*Stand by Your Man*

will have a happier ending than the one you know is coming. Tobias appears to be a supremely giving performer, and in addition to enacting one of the most believable on-stage drunks I've ever seen - managing to be both lightly comic and tenderly pathetic - he generously cedes the spotlight to Hughes, even when, as in a duet, they'd appear evenly matched. This is a true Star Performance, but Tobias understands where the show's focus needs to be, and

*never*

grandstands.

Stage work this perfectly calibrated isn't just honorable but *noble*, and in his scenes with Hughes, Tobias brings out something warm and richly textured in the actress. Even though her pitch is a little uncertain, especially in the higher register, Hughes does an admirable job on Wynette's songs - with a truly marvelous, climactic take on the musical's title number - but what you remember from her portrayal isn't so much the music as it is the radiant grace she exudes; even when playing Wynette's years as a perky, fledgling performer, Hughes is a inspiringly serene presence. (Audiences may be astonished to learn that the actress is only 21 years old.) She has touching moments all throughout the show - Hughes makes a lovely, hesitant walk toward Jones during their first romantic encounter - and even when stuck with hackneyed lines, her delivery softens them up; as delivered by Hughes, the bad dialogue

*doesn't*

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land with a clunk. (She even gets away with chestnuts like, "If you can't give up the liquor, then I'm giving up on you.")

Performances as good as Hughes' and Tobias' would be enough for an evening, but *Stand by Your Man*

gives you

*more*

than enough, and not just of Tammy Wynette trivia. The effortlessly dynamic Erin Churchill (nee Dickerson) plays several characters with spirited warmth; at one point, she performed a haunting take on "How Great Thou Art," and I thought: Indeed. Kim Harne, playing Wynette's mother, is an honest and - to the audience's constant delight - enjoyably sassy presence. And the show's sensationally gifted band members walk in and out of musical backup mode to assay a number of roles with easygoing good humor, with Jimmy Bishop's Don Chapel (a.k.a. Wynette husband two-of-five) particularly endearing.

Directorially, there appeared to be only one awkward misstep in Licata's helming of *Stand by Your Man*

, when the audience is asked to clap along to Harne's rendition of "God's Gonna Getcha for That," and the show's fourth wall is momentarily shattered; although the Circa '21 audience is frequently asked to applaud during the show's concert scenes, this request comes in the middle of a scene proper, and being directly addressed when we thought we were merely observers was, for a brief moment, jarring.

But Licata does a fine job of orchestrating *Stand by Your Man's* vignettes into a production with real flow - despite the factoid-heavy, one-thing-after-another nature of the script, there are no dead spots - and it's hard to blame the director for that one wall-breaking indulgence; at Friday night's performance, the audience, who gave the show a standing ovation, would probably have forgiven Licata for including many more

*of*

them.

*For tickets, call (309) 786-7733 extension 2.*