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Let me preface by saying that the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's Friday performance of *Always ... Patsy Cline* received a hearty standing ovation, which, based on the happy audience murmurs that circulated whenever the band began one of the country singer's signature numbers, appeared largely composed of Cline admirers.

If that assumption is correct, then their response was perfectly understandable: To the fans' delight - and my *dismay* - *Always ... Patsy Cline* is about a half-dozen different Cline shows rolled into one. Ted Swindley, cited as the production's "author," certainly gives you plenty of Cline tunes for your buck - some two dozen in all - but he switches styles so egregiously and relentlessly that this musical biography seems, to me, quite loopy; I would've traded a dozen songs for a coherent presentation.

Written by Mike Schulz
Wednesday, 13 June 2007 02:37

At first, the show - directed by the Showboat's new artistic director, Craig A. Miller - is a straight-on reenactment of a Cline concert, with the crooner (played by Julia Kay Laskowski) performing directly to the audience, accompanied by a four-piece band. Yet while the group plays well enough, it's immediately clear that Laskowski isn't going to enjoy much interaction with her musicians, whose eyes are squarely focused on their sheet music; Laskowski spends her first two numbers looking stranded.

Afterwards, though, the character of Louise Seger (Lyndsay Sweeney) shows up - an excitable, sassy acolyte at the shrine of Patsy - and *Always ...* drops its concert format in favor of a biographical narrative, with Cline's performances serving as musical punctuation between Seger's comedic recollections. (*Always ...* is purportedly based on a true story, but it plays as an unconvincing conceit, and while Sweeney is a vibrant actress who appears fabulously comfortable during her monologues, her shtick would've been funnier if the character weren't so busy cracking *herself* up.)

But then we switch *back* to concert mode; Seger meets her idol at a Texan honky tonk, the two become fast friends, and the musical numbers - with Seger oftentimes appearing *in* them - are again performed presentationally.

But *then*, we follow the women to Seger's home, where the two converse and Cline's songs now flow directly out of their conversation, as in a traditional book musical - a reference to no-good spouses leads to "Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray," a mention of "crazy" love lives leads to ... well, you get the picture

Incredibly, there are even more stylistic switches to come - after the stars' curtain call, they bizarrely pop *back* into character for a couple of encores - and this incessant toggling makes Swindley, as an "author," appear both schizophrenic and incredibly lazy; he seems to feel that narrative be damned, *any* excuse to get Cline's numbers out there is a valid one. Friday's audience certainly seemed to agree, yet I, personally, found no joy in the presentation. Even a jukebox revue of this sort has to deliver *some* kind of consistency, and this one too often left me scratching my head.

Dissin' "Cline": "Always ... Patsy Cline," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through June 17

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As for Laskowski, she hits the right notes and has lovely tonality, but not until well into Act II does she sing with the passion and vibrancy that made Cline a legend; it's a pleasant performance but not, unfortunately, an *exciting* one. To be fair, though, the actress may have been put off by the couple sitting 10 feet away from me, who talked -

loudly

- throughout the show. The annoyance in Laskowski's expression as she frequently stared down these chatterboxes (albeit in character) was the most honest aspect of

Always ... Patsy Cline

, and one of the few that made any sense whatsoever.

For tickets, call (563) 242-6760.