

Written by Thom White  
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I can't imagine anyone who likes the music of Patsy Cline not liking the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's current offering, *A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline*. Personally, I don't much care for the mid-20th-Century country style of Cline's songs. However, I very much appreciated Friday night's performance for its staging and its remarkable singing, and therefore, enjoyed music I'd otherwise ignore were I to hear it on the radio.

*A Closer Walk* is barely a scripted show, playing much more as a Patsy Cline concert, with a radio DJ, Grand Ole Opry comic, and Las Vegas comedian (all played by Tom Walljasper) interjecting tidbits about the popular artist in between every third song or so. (When Cline's numbers are sung during the radio show *within* this musical, the band also performs the station's call-letters jingle and a couple of classic commercials, and does so with beautiful harmonies.) On the whole, though, there's not a lot of storytelling, with the piece progressing from one Patsy Cline hit to the next, moving along at a minimally interrupted pace. We do not watch Cline's life unfold on stage; instead, we simply sit back and enjoy her life's work.

This being the case, almost the entire weight of the revue falls on the shoulders of the actress portraying Cline: Heather Beck. I'm not familiar enough with the real Cline's mannerisms and vocal tone and quality to say, with any authority, whether Beck seems to channel the singer in her own performance. But I can say, with complete conviction, that Beck's singing is stunning. She has a rich, pitch-perfect sound that could easily be sultry enough to melt any man's heart. Beck doesn't allow any sultriness to sneak into her depiction of Patsy Cline, however, and sings the part sweetly and unassumingly, with no pretense whatsoever.



That the piece itself also lacks pretense is due to director Ann Nieman's handling of it. She hasn't attempted to add drama or overplay the sentiment. Instead, she stages Cline's songs simply, while directing Walljasper to add amusing bits here and there, and creates a perfect fit - an evening that's smile-inducing and gently pleasing.

Nieman's handling of the final scene, however, sent goosebumps up my arms and chills down my spine. I hesitate to provide specifics, so as not to take the edge off its emotional power. But at the mention of Cline's death, the revue's writers chose an apt reprise, with an even more apt verse starting it off, and Nieman's presentation adds an ethereal element to the moment that - when accompanied by Beck's voice - is deeply moving.

## Gotta Lot of Rhythm in Her Soul: “A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline,” at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse thro

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It is designer Susan D. Holgersson's giant jukebox of a set piece, however, that carries the most drama, with its projected images - of the jukebox's track selection, of stained-glass windows, of theatre marquees - creating a stunning backdrop for Circa '21's offering. And lighting designer Ron Breedlove's effects make Holgersson's creation all the more effective, with their changing colors and patterns creating dynamic visuals.

*A Closer Walk with Patsy Cline* is really just a genteel celebration of the songstress and her music. Yet with its classy air, Circa '21's presentation seems to truly honor Cline through its respectful rendering of her hits, and Beck's exquisite singing of them.

*For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733, extension 2, or visit [Circa21.com](http://Circa21.com).*

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