



BUFFALO'S #1 ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLY

ARTVOICE

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Theaterweek

by Anthony Chase

Two shows playing locally at the moment feature biographies of 20th century American entertainment super stars. In *Sammy & Me* at MusicalFare, actor/playwright Eric Jordan Young explores his own fascination with Sammy Davis, Jr.; *Always ...*



Eric Jordan Young in "Sammy & Me"

Patsy Cline at the Kavinoky is a biographical sketch told by Louise Seger, a devoted fan who forges a friendship with the country music legend during a memorable night in Houston.

While each show involves impersonation, *Always ... Patsy Cline* is more purely an impersonation show. Kelly Ann Krupski plays Patsy Cline, singing like her with remarkable accuracy. This impressive performance is almost the entire reason to go to the show, for the script is exceedingly slight and ultimately serves to provide her with time to rest her voice and change costumes.

Lisa Ann Ludwig plays the devoted fan, and valiantly commits to her character, cornpone wisdom, big hair, and all.

The printed program tells us that *Always ... Patsy Cline*, written and originally directed by Ted Swindley, is "based on a true

story." Well you can just tell! Why, but for its historical accuracy, would we be burdened with so uninteresting a narrative? Its magical revelation is the reason the show is called "*Always dot, dot, dot, Patsy Cline.*" I won't give it away.

As Louise Seger, Ludwig narrates the details of her life, her job, her family, the night she met Miss Patsy Cline, and the letter-writing relationship that followed. She dances with a member of the audience and sings a couple of numbers with Patsy. At times the experience is reminiscent of watching Polly Holiday as Flo on the old "Alice" television show. In that spirit, let's just say that Miss Ludwig is ... a hoot. Had she been born sooner, this gig could have been her ticket to a guest spot on "Hee-Haw."

The Patsy Cline character is mercifully less developed and is therefore allowed, for the most part, simply to sing for us with the accompaniment of a winning country band featuring the talents of Jim Ehinger on piano, Ted Lambert on fiddle, Doug Morgano on guitar, Mike Phelps on drums, Nick Ventry on bass, and Jim Whitford on pedal steel guitar. They're terrific.

Always ... Patsy Cline continues through February 5th.

By contrast, *Sammy & Me*, written by Mr. Young with Wendy Dann, is a complex and insightful examination of racial tensions in America during the life and career of Sammy Davis, Jr. Using his own autobiography, Young tells how his unbridled hero worship of Davis was complicated as he became aware of the moral compromises the performer made in order to advance his career – the racist insults he was willing to endure, his complicity in promoting a political agenda repressive to Black America, and so forth.

Using the conceit of being confronted with a headline critical of Davis on the eve of his own opening in a concert in which he is to sing Sammy's repertoire, Young ultimately works through the man's contradictions and is able to embrace the luminescent talent of his idol once more.

For audience members expecting an evening of "Candy Man" and "I Gotta Be Me" (which are also featured) it might be a difficult journey, but the rewards are far greater than the superficial show we might have imagined. Moreover, any clumsy heavy-handedness in Young and Dann's telling of the tale could easily be adjusted without diluting the power of the remarkable story of Sammy Davis, Jr., and with playing, the incandescence of the man should glow brighter and brighter.

Mr. Young himself, a Williamsville native who went from local

theater to a Broadway career, including a stint as Billy Flynn in the Broadway company of *Chicago*, is an impressive talent with an irresistibly likable personality. He is handsome, has a wonderful singing voice, and is a superbly graceful dancer. His impersonation of Sammy Davis, Jr. is especially convincing as he approaches the entertainer's later years.

Sammy & Me continues through February 12th.

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