

Westword

ENCORE

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Always...Patsy Cline. *Always Patsy Cline* is a light, mildly entertaining evening. You get an efficiently evocative set that's divided into three parts: a down-home apartment; an old-fashioned country bar, complete with jukebox; and, in the center, the stage of the Grand Ole Opry. There are two skilled singer-performers, one of them also a comic, working in front of a tight, professional group of musicians in cowboy hats. Bright, colored lights play over the scene, and audience participation -- clapping, whooping, singing along -- is encouraged, lubricated by beer, wine and martinis. This piece, adapted by Ted Swindley, is based on a real friendship between Patsy Cline and a fervent fan, Louise, but the singing is at the heart of the enterprise, and many of the songs are close to irresistible. Presented by Denver Center Attractions through March 27, Galleria Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 14th and Curtis streets, 303-893-4100, www.denvercenter.org. Reviewed December 16.

Buicks. Julian Sheppard's *Buicks* falls squarely in the middle-age-male life-crisis genre. Bill, who owns a car dealership and has a wife, Kathy, and two children, is a glad-handing, posturing creep -- mildly racist and, most of all, utterly oblivious to the thoughts and feelings of those around him. He doesn't see his Mexican secretary, Naranja, as a person. He doesn't relate in any meaningful way to his wife. His ability to parent his children -- who never appear on stage -- is nil. When Kathy leaves him, Bill has no idea how to carry on. He takes to the road in one of his Buicks with half an intention of chasing down his wife, and with some vague idea about road trips and adventure and finding himself. There's also a lot of dialogue that's interesting and original, as well as some genuinely affecting revelatory moments. Presented by Paragon Theatre Company through March 5, Phoenix Theatre, 1124 Santa Fe Drive, 303-300-2210, www.paragontheatre.com. Reviewed February 24.

Cats. This company does as good a job with *Cats* as one can imagine. The dancing, choreographed by Stephen Bertles, who also directed, is seamless. The cast is lithe and graceful. They slither like snakes. They leap high and land without a sound. They're wonderfully into character, batting at each other with kitty-cat paws, or hissing or rubbing a head lightly against a fellow actor's shoulder. The voices and performances are also fine, and there are a few good numbers, such as "Mungojerrie and Rumpleteazer" and "Gus the Theatre Cat." There's also the T.S. Eliot factor: *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is the dour old poet's most playful work. But this is still Andrew Lloyd Webber, the composer-impresario who arrived on the musical-theater scene like a soggy gray blanket, snuffing out any sparks of wit or originality and leaving in their place a huge, throbbing, manipulative, faintly ecclesiastical and unfocusedly ecstatic swamp of sentimentality. It's a swamp that snares these dancing kitties' feet, no matter how high they try to

leap. Presented by Boulder Dinner Theatre through May 1, 5501 Arapahoe Avenue, Boulder, 303-442-5671, www.theatreinboulder.com. Reviewed December 2.

Fool for Love. Ed Baierlein has mounted a clean, skilled, well-acted production of Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* at Germinal Stage and, paradoxically, the production's strengths highlight the play's weaknesses. The action takes place in a cheap motel room at the edge of the Mojave Desert, where May and Eddie are performing yet another sequence in a dance of attraction-repulsion that's been going on since both of them were in high school. An old man sits silently in a rocking chair, drinking. Outside lurks an enigmatic figure who periodically makes herself known through glaring headlights and explosions of sound. This is Eddie's other woman, who has come to track him down. The play holds your interest and continually hints at a deeper meaning beneath the flying words. But even as you worry away at the puzzle, you're fighting the suspicion that there's less here than meets the eye. Presented by Germinal Stage Denver through March 6, 2450 West 44th Avenue, 303-455-7108, www.germinalstage.com. Reviewed February 24.

Impulse Theater. Basements and comedy go together like beer and nuts or toddlers and sandboxes. The basement of the Wynkoop Brewery where Impulse Theater performs is crowded, loud and energetic. Impulse does no prepared skits, nothing but pure improv -- which means that what you see changes every night, and so does the team of actors. These actors set up and follow certain rules and frameworks; they rely on audience suggestions to get these scenes going or to vary the action. Your level of enjoyment depends a lot on whether or not you like the players. Charm is a factor, and so is the ability to take risks. Fortunately, the performers are clever and fast on their feet, willing to throw themselves into the action but never betraying tension or anxiety, perfectly content to shrug off a piece that isn't coming together. The show is funny when the actors hit a groove, but equally funny when they get stymied. So, in a way, the improvisers -- and the audience -- can't lose. Presented by Impulse Theater in an open-ended run, Wynkoop Brewing Co., 18th and Wynkoop streets, 303-297-2111 or www.impulsetheater.com. Reviewed June 3.

Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris. Jacques Brel was a Belgian singer-songwriter whose reputation took flight in the 1950s and '60s. His songs influenced, among others, Leonard Cohen, David Bowie, Sting and Bob Dylan, and they have been sung by such diverse artists as Frank Sinatra and Nina Simone. They're verbally and musically complex, sentimental and cynical, worldly wise and world-weary, celebratory, funny. Has anyone since Gilbert and Sullivan fit words and music together so cleverly? And has the world's seamy underside been so powerfully expressed in music since Brecht-Weill? The evening starts with "Marathon," a fast, infectiously rhythmic number that whirls us through the twentieth century, from the bathtub gin of the '20s to the Depression, from World War II to contemporary space travel. The lyrics evoke several of the evening's primary themes. Brel sings of the dark side of life, of greed, lust, rank smells, human perfidy and the sorrows of aging. But there is tenderness, redemption and giddy pleasure here as well. The musicians are first-rate. The four singers excel individually and harmonize well together. So put on your spats and your high-button shoes: This is everything cabaret should be. Presented by the Theatre Cafe in an open-ended run, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 14th and Curtis streets, 303-893-4100. Reviewed November 25.

A Lovely Sunday at Creve Coeur. This play contains all the well-known Tennessee Williams motifs -- the allusions to a universal and existential loneliness, the sense that the characters are

trapped inside their own skins -- but though these strains add a familiar resonance, the characters haven't stepped from the pages of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *Orpheus Descending*. They're broadly drawn comic originals. And they're brought to pitch-perfect life by four of the Denver Center Theatre Company's best actresses. *Creve Coeur* was written toward the end of Williams's life, in 1978, but it is set during the Depression, when single women had few career choices and lived in constant fear of destitution. Williams was still examining the issues of class that had preoccupied him thirty years earlier in *Streetcar* -- the presumed vitality of the working class, the increasing irrelevance of educated, upper-class women. However, the working stiff is no longer represented by gorgeous, muscled Stanley Kowalski, but by an offstage character called Buddy, a fat German who likes sausages and beer, as well as by Buddy's equally zaftig sister, Bodey, who bustles about the apartment she shares with schoolteacher Dorothea and plots to bring Buddy and Dorothea together. And there's another basic difference. Stanley was seductive, but he was also a vicious destroyer. Buddy and Bodey are good-hearted; they represent life, maybe even salvation. True, it's a sad, limited kind of salvation, but salvation is nothing to sneer at, particularly during a depression. The work of Williams's last years has often been dismissed as a thin echo of his powerful early plays, yet it's clear from this lovely piece that he continued to develop as an artist. It speaks volumes, too, that his lost and broken characters have discovered that the only way to survive is to take care of each other. Presented by the Denver Center Theatre Company through March 12. The Jones Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex, 14th and Curtis streets, 303-893-4100, www.denvercenter.org. Reviewed February 3.

Paul Robeson. Phillip Hayes Dean's *Paul Robeson* is a one-man play and has the limitations of its genre. Nonetheless, it provides a wonderful evening of theater. At the play's beginning, Robeson, aged 75, is preparing a tape to send to an event being held at Carnegie Hall in his honor. We learn about Robeson's difficulties with racism while a student and football player at Rutgers; his participation in the Harlem Renaissance; his work with Eugene O'Neill. The musical *Showboat* took him to London, where he found a culture more congenial than his own. In 1934, Robeson suffered a terrifying encounter with Hitler's Brownshirts, and he spent much of the rest of his life fighting fascism. Robeson was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 and eventually blacklisted. The result was "my being erased from the consciousness of the American people." Russell Costen's performance in the title role is superb -- highly skilled, and a generous and open-hearted act of tribute. Presented by Shadow Theatre Company through March 5. Ralph Waldo Emerson Center, 1420 Ogden Street, 303-837-9355, www.shadowtheatre.com. Reviewed February 17.

A Raisin in the Sun. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* originally opened on Broadway in 1959 -- before the civil-rights movement found its full momentum. While it tells the tale of an African-American family's struggles in Chicago, it's not so much the plot that gives the play its power as the web of meaning beneath it. Laura K. Love's detailed, evocative set, with its brick walls and blank windows framing the cluttered apartment, adds texture to the production. For the most part, however, the actors lack the necessary authority for their roles. Gabrielle Goyette has emotional traction as Lena, but everything from her walk to her line readings feels externally added rather than the result of an inner impulse. Cajardo Rameer Lindsey brings humor and some intelligent underplaying to the role of Walter Lee, but you don't really feel much for the character until the play's climax. Kamaria King's Beneatha is vivid and sprightly, if narrowly

drawn. Chaz Grundy makes Joseph Asagai so slow-moving and oddly accented that the character is almost cartoonish. Adrienne Martin-Fullwood is a warm, empathetic Ruth. Nervous, equivocating, fiddling with his shiny pen, Michael McNeill creates a strong impression as the white racist who -- under the guise of friendly advice -- warns the Youngers not to move into his neighborhood. Presented by the Arvada Center through March 6, 6901 Wadsworth Boulevard, Arvada, 720-898-7200, www.arvadacenter.org. Reviewed February 17.

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