

A 'Coal Miner's Daughter' remembers roots

By MARK E. GALLO

In the five summers I've been visiting the Meadow Brook Music Festival, I have never seen such a splendidly large audience as on Friday.

It was the first area appearance in years of Loretta Lynn, the "Coal Miner's Daughter." The audience may have been largely composed of the curious sprinkled in with the true-blue fans, due to her recent television touring with opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti and her biographical movie.

Her recent naming as Country Entertainer of the Decade certainly su-

review

preceded any other considerations, however.

Singer/songwriter Johnny Russell's opening act was heavily dosed with comedy, but not enough to overshadow the fine accompanying musicians and Russell's own boisterously strong voice.

The large man had a handful of "fat"

jokes to break up the flow of music and to break up the audience. Their set included standards like "Honky Tonk Angels," which he sang in duet with his wife Beverly, and "Act Naturally," a song from Russell's own pen in 1963.

Sandwiched tightly between Russell and Loretta Lynn was Lynn's niece, Herma Lee, who sang beautifully like another family member, Crystal Gale.

LORETTA JAUNTILY bounded onstage in a flowing off-pink and white gown and simply took the audience's breath away. One fan gave her a bouquet of colorful flowers. Another

pair stretched a banner proclaiming "We Love You, Loretta."

"If You're Lookin' At Me, You're Lookin' At Country" segued into "Country Road" leading off a night of simply heavenly music — Hillbilly Heaven.

"What did you all come here to hear?" The reply, of course, was a cacophony of shouts, none of which was discernible and she chuckled, "Oh, we'll get to them all."

Loretta Lynn embodies country music. Cowboy hats were conspicuously absent here. This wasn't about cowboys. This was about life in the

southeast, coal mining country.

The songs spoke of cheating, family life, bars and just staying alive. Lyrics like "I've got a picture of you on my mind," "You ain't woman enough to steal my man" and "Don't come home drinkin', with lovin' on your mind" abound in her repertoire.

Standout songs were Emmy Lou Harris' beautiful "Blue Kentucky Girl," "Coal Miner's Daughter," "The Pill" and "God Bless America, Again."

A foursome of backup singers provided a break for Loretta and she trotted offstage and let them sing and the

band play. They offered "Family Circle," "Will The Circle Be Unbroken" and "Gone With The Wind" wonderfully woven in a gospel-sounding handclapping, foot stompin' style.

"I Saw The Light" closed the evening and had the thousands of audience members clapping and singing heartily.

There was no encore. Instead, Loretta Lynn agreed to stay and sign autographs until there were no more requests.

That's the way people are in her neck of the woods. They don't forget they're just like you and me.

'Wings': a play to be absorbed, if not enjoyed

By JODY A CUMMINGS

Before a solitary person appears on stage, before a single light comes up, the music begins: a cacophonous series of notes and chords that fills the small theater and sends chills down the spine.

Thus begins "Wings," Stagerafter's hypnotic Michigan premiere of Arthur Kopit's play about a woman's struggle

to recover from a stroke.

The play completes its two-weekend run Friday and Saturday in Stagecrafters' Clawson playhouse.

Shawnee Spedden is Emily Stilton, the victim whose stroke leaves her with a mind that can recognize but cannot interpret. She often communicates with the audience and tells us that recovering from a stroke is "like clouds you can't push through." A former aviator and wing-walker, she is now

faced with the far-harder task of learning how to live again.

The acting in this haunting drama is exceptional. Ms. Spedden is backed by a supporting cast that seems not so much to be a collection of individual characters as an assemblage of instruments used to elaborate on Mrs. Stilton's personal agony. This is primarily a one-woman play, and the other members of the cast are successfully low-key and allow Ms. Spedden to fight her way through the endless gibberish and

nonsensical ravings that her character's mind produces.

THE LIGHTING and special effects are vital to this show. Much of its necessarily uncomfortable impact would be lost if the technical crew had not been able to transpose the agony of a shattered mind to harsh lights and expressive sound effects.

No community theater production is perfect and Director Hal Robinson has

made some definite mistakes. His most glaring error is Mrs. Stilton's actual stroke in the opening scene. This has the potential to unabashedly horrify the audience, and although the effects are creative — two mobile black flats covered with shards of broken glass that reflect fractured lights — Ms. Spedden does not convey the mindless terror that would surely have a stranglehold on a stroke victim. This scene should have been para-choreographed to attain its full effectiveness, but Robin-

son's blocking here seems awkward and uncomfortable.

This is, however, just one scene out of an entire play, and although there are other directorial problems, they are relatively few and minor.

This is not a show that can be enjoyed. Rather, it is to be studied, absorbed, and not forgotten. Although it has its setbacks, Stagecrafters' production nonetheless leaves one with a haunting, unnerving feeling that is not quick to disappear.

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