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Today's Edition

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All that jazz

WAYFARER

Dinner theatres, live music, architectural marvels and great food make the Twin Cities of Minneapolis-St Paul vibrant and unforgettable, says **Veena Gomes-Patwardhan**



(From top) The Patsy Cline show in progress at the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres; A glimpse of the Mall of America

The scene was reminiscent of what I had often seen in the movies: a steady stream of people in elegant evening wear advancing towards the open doors of a beautifully illuminated venue for an enchanting night out at the theatre. Only, the guests were not exactly in tailcoats and gowns, and this wasn't just any theatre. It was a dinner theatre. Unacquainted with the term? Well, I was too, till a Minnesotan friend suggested an evening at the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres during my trip to Minneapolis-St Paul, or the Twin Cities as they are popularly known.

Dinner theatres are all about making life easier for theatre enthusiasts for whom dining out and theatre usually go together like say, Diwali and *mithai*, or rather, since we're talking America here, Thanksgiving and roast turkey. The calling card of these fun places is the availability of good food and a stage show in one location. And in my case, the clincher was that one of the musicals being staged at the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres was *Always...Patsy Cline* — a tribute to the legendary country singer, many of whose songs used to be my favourites in the 1970s.

So there I was with my friend, on my first evening in the Twin Cities, after a short drive from my hotel, the Aloft, in downtown Minneapolis, joining the others streaming into the sprawling, three-theatre, 90,000sq ft facility. A smiling, white-haired gentleman looking dapper in a black tuxedo greeted patrons as they entered the lobby, occasionally helping out with directions too. Those with tickets for the classic *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* were directed to the Main Dining Theatre where guests dine at private tables arranged in front of the stage. The *Patsy Cline* show was being staged at the Fireside Theatre, the only one with a separate dining area, and so we were guided there — an elegant hall with a retro-chic ambience located at a lower level. As soon as we got there than we were ushered to our seats at a table draped in a crisp white tablecloth on which ruby red napkins were propped up in Origami-style pyramids.

The \$50 ticket included an entrée served along with plump, freshly baked bread rolls, butter, a garden salad, and milk, coffee or tea. Appetisers, drinks and desserts were available at an additional cost. I could choose from six entrées, but they all seemed so temptingly delicious I didn't know what to pick. Finally, I settled for succulent walleye fillets served with fragrant wild rice pilaf — both Minnesotan specialities.

At the Fireside Theatre, it was almost a full house. Seating in the modest-size auditorium was much like in a movie theatre. At exactly 8pm, the lights in the hall were dimmed, and the gentleman we had seen in the lobby earlier, strode on to

the stage with a cheerful welcome speech in tow. Soon, he withdrew into the shadows and the magic began.

Replete with country humour and catchy, hip-swinging music, the show presented fascinating glimpses into Cline's rise to stardom as seen through the eyes of Louise Seger, a Texan fan with whom Cline used to correspond regularly till her tragic death in a plane crash at the age of 30. The award-winning actor, Peggy 'Connell, played the role of the bubbly, endearing Texan housewife, while Monica Heuser did a perfect impersonation of Cline's husky contralto right from the first song — *Honky-tonk Merry-Go-Round*. The two-hour show provided an exhilarating experience of a slice of Americana and a nostalgic trip back to my college days.



(From top) The internationally acclaimed Guthrie Theater, The main dining hall at the Chanhassen Dinner Theatres

The next morning I got up in my hotel room crooning *I'm on a honky-tonk merry-go-round, making every stop in town....* I actually did have a lot of stops to make, and in two towns, but unfortunately, had only a day in hand. The previous day I had toured only parts of the Twin Cities including the internationally acclaimed Guthrie Theater, just a short walk from my hotel.

If you're partial to serious cinema and Shakespeare, the Guthrie should be high up on your agenda. The building, acknowledged as one of Minneapolis' architectural marvels, overlooks the Mississippi, the historic St Anthony Falls and Stone Arch Bridge, all of which had powered the city to the position of "the flour milling capital of the world". But that was around a century ago. Today, with numerous theatres and restaurants offering live music, Minneapolis is better known as an entertainment hotspot.

I spent my last day there visiting the gigantic Mall of America, and then, to cover my bases, going for the MetroConnections guided Twin Cities Highlights Tour. As we coasted past unending vistas of lush parks, shimmering lakes, historic buildings, museums, and elegant neighbourhoods, I wished I had planned a longer stay. By evening I was in the mood for live jazz and so when a friend suggested we check out one of the more high-profile jazz venues — the Dakota Jazz Club and Restaurant — I promptly agreed.

When we got there, the place was bustling with a good weekday crowd. The tastefully lit interiors, the brick-accented walls adorned with pictures of jazz legends and the superb acoustics, heightened the feeling that this was just the spot for some much needed unwinding. The well-known jazz guitarist Robert Everest and his band of eclectic musicians took us around the world that evening presenting splendidly diverse pieces ranging from American Jazz to Brazilian Samba and Spanish flamenco. We just sat back in our booth and enjoyed the music, sipping on sparkling Minnesota Martinis. When the waitress brought us our dinner, I discovered one more reason for the popularity of this über-cool hang out — the food was amazing.

At a stoplight on the drive back to my hotel, I noticed a bumper sticker on a guy's car that read "I prefer the Minneapple". And I couldn't help thinking, "Ya, dude, now I know why."

READY RECKONER



Staying there: In downtown Minneapolis, you could stay at The Aloft (around \$70 onwards) or the Radisson Plaza (around \$80 onwards). In downtown St Paul, go for the Hilton Garden Inn (around \$100 onwards).

Eating there: Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis and Grand Avenue in St Paul have dining options ranging from small cafés to posh restaurants, with traditional American and international cuisine.

Photographs by author

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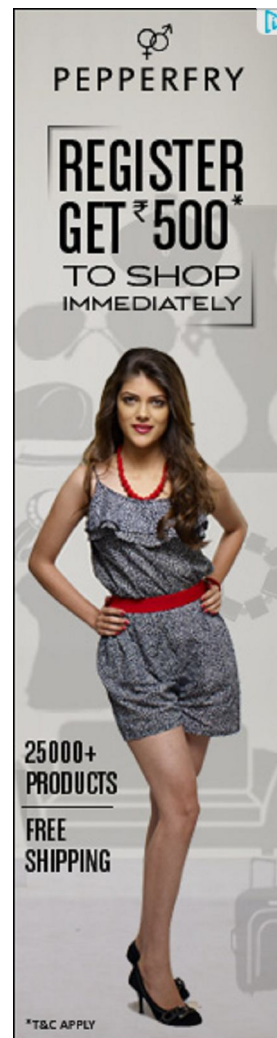
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