

## Entertainment

# 'Jacques Brel is...' great

By Jacki Horwitz

It's been 10 years since "Jacques Brel Is ..." played Los Angeles and nearly 20 years since the cabaret collage of his songs opened at The Village Gate in Greenwich Village in 1968.

A legend in Paris in the '50s, Brel was a unique writer of songs, whose poetic insights turned seemingly mundane events into exalted examples of the human struggle to simply and, if possible, nobly, survive.

Brel wrote about love: its joy and its pain, its unexpected turns. He wrote about waterfront sailors and lonely soldiers losing their innocence to a soon-to-be-forgotten caress. He wrote about street urchins beginning a life on the streets or the dreams and illusions of store clerks. But always Brel, who had been born to a wealthy Belgian family, wrote about ordinary people, the unsung ones who sit quietly watching their children grow, watching themselves grow, while the tick from the silver clock on the mantle grows louder with each passing day.

Brel's songs are like miniature stage plays, and like Brecht and Weill, John Prine or Joni Mitchell, they embrace us by touching on the little mysteries of life that confound us all. Wandering slowly through Brel's lyrics helps us to see, if not understand, those mysteries just a bit more clearly.

That is this reviewer's love letter to Brel, who died in 1978 at the age of 49. Now begins another love letter, to the ensemble at The Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, for their beautifully rendered interpretation of his music.

If you have seen "Jacques Brel Is ..." performed before, don't go to this show expecting the traditional moody stagecraft that has earmarked other productions. Director Allan Miller wisely understands that the emotion of Brel's language in the

### REVIEW

**JACQUES BREL IS ...**, music and lyrics by Jacques Brel, English translation by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman, directed by Allan Miller, set design by Rich Rose, lighting design by Leslie Rose, costumes by Sylvia Moss, musical direction by Steven Bernstein, at The Back Alley Theater, 15231 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys, through May 31. Performances Thursday-Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 2 and 7 p.m., tickets \$13.50-\$17.50; (818) 780-2240. The ensemble: Joseph Cardinale, Melissa Converse, Michael G. Hawkins, Geraldine Joyce, Thom Keeling. The musicians: Steven Bernstein, Scott Perlof, Pablo Aslan.

traditional English translation by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman, and the heart-grabbing power of his music are enough to thoroughly engulf an audience. So he lets Brel speak for himself, through five talented performers, three musicians, a minimalist set and costumes that subtly suggest a Parisian music hall.

The result is a show that is simply splendid. It gives audiences an opportunity to either reacquaint themselves with or hear for the first time the many sides of Brel. I say many sides because he not only was a romantic who kept his eyes closed to the affairs of the heart but a rugged realist and social commentator, whose prose could easily pierce the armor of middle-class manners or the dark symbolism shadowing a Sunday afternoon bullfight.

But the romantic songs are the ones you most likely will carry home with you, particularly the now classic "If We Only Have Love." It is the emotional climax of the show, beginning quietly on a semi-lit stage. As it gathers momentum, filling the theater with its passionate plea, the stage and house lights are slowly brought up, revealing actors and audience in quiet reflection. For an intimate theater experience, this is as good as it gets.



**Geraldine Joyce and Michael Hawkins** sing in "Jacques Brel is..." at Back Alley Theater.