

# Around the Valley

I wasn't ready for another night out with Agamemnon

**T**he last time I visited the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, about a year ago, I was hoping to be carried to catharsis by the fatalistic poetry of ancient Greek playwrights.

The idea of Greek tragedies, all condensed into a single production, being staged in a cinder-block building on Burbank Boulevard seemed just odd enough to demand notice.

I wondered how Aeschylus would play in Van Nuys.

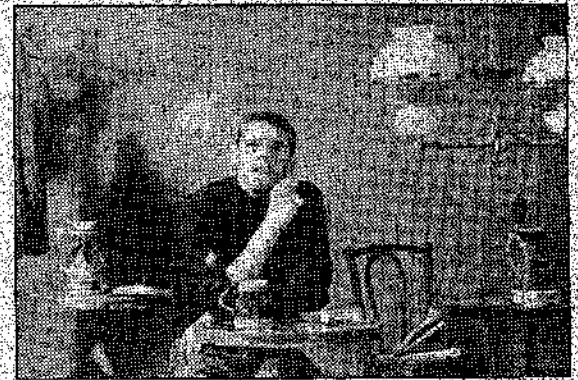
Unfortunately, as I mentioned at the time, I abandoned the enterprise after just a couple of episodes in which a stiff-limbed Agamemnon with an indistinguishable foreign accent bumbled toward his fate in the company of a chorus of ever-shrieking women.

So annoying were all these histrionics that, after the climactic scene, the woman beside me said, more or less out loud, "Thank God, they finally killed Agamemnon off."

Since then, I have always felt I owed the Back Alley another chance. It is one of the more aggressive of the many small theaters scattered around the Valley, struggling against inertia to create a ripple of urbanity.

Its directors are willing to do something, even if it's different or risky.

"So much of the time, all we get to see in the Los Angeles area are pale reproductions," said the theater's co-producing director, Laura Zucker. "If you don't take chances, you don't get better. We're not choosing things because we think ahead of time



they're going to be popular. We choose them because they're intrinsically interesting."

I like that attitude.

So what if the ambiance of a Valley commercial strip doesn't quite evoke the excitement of 42nd Street — or even Santa Monica Boulevard? Live theater that will go out on a limb in one's own community is something that should not be slighted out of pettiness.

On the other hand, I wasn't ready for another night out with Agamemnon and his shrieking women.

The right moment finally came last week when the Back Alley held over its latest production, "Jacques Brel Is." The fact that it was held over offered promise, and, besides, I'm a fan of the piece. That title is a shortened form of "Jacques Brel Is

## Y NEWS

By DOUG SMITH

Alive and Well and Living in Paris," a Broadway musical pieced together from translations of the Belgian composer and singer who still maintains something of a cult following almost a decade after his death in 1979.

Having learned Brel's songs in the original French, and understanding only by a strained form of inference, I have always been on the periphery of the cult.

Without knowing exactly what the words mean, it is still easy to grasp from the singer's mercurial voice—becoming now sarcastic, now terrified, now raucous, now serene—that he was working in themes that are generally off-limits to American popular music.

The poetic and chilling translations and scattered original lyrics that make up the 1968 musical confirm the most extreme reaction to Brel's music.

The words to those lyrical, sometimes purely sentimental tunes probe the darkest shadows of the psyche—the fear of growing up, the fear of dying, the power of sex, the terror of growing old, the pain of loneliness and rejection, the moral panic of a life that seems to move faster and faster toward nowhere.

I would have thought that was all too much angst for Van Nuys.

But the Saturday night crowd at the Back Alley showed that assumption to be wrong.

The 93-seat theater was filled 15 minutes before curtain time. So great was the anticipation that the last to arrive accepted cafeteria chairs without

complaint. A group that walked in after the house lights were cut stood at the back until intermission and then splintered out to single seats.

The performers, two women and three men, gave spunky, hip renditions that strangely accentuated the dark mood of verses like:

"My death waits like a Bible truth at the funeral of my youth. Weep loud for that and the passing time. My death waits like a witch at night."

They danced a soft-shoe while singing:

"The girls treat you like trash. The dogs, they just lick your face when they see it. Oh, the dogs don't depend on a thing. And maybe that's why they're man's best friend."

As a middle-aged dreamer, one pinned himself against the wall in wrenching pain while wishing he could "be, for just one little hour, cute, cute, cute in a stupid-ass way."

Finally, the whole cast went into an uncontrolled spin to Brel's accelerating waltz:

"We're on a carousel, a crazy carousel," they sang. "And now we spin around. We're high above the ground. And down again around. And up again around. So high above the ground. We feel we've got to yell."

Like a good Greek tragedy, "Jacques Brel Is" took its audience through a catharsis, resolved in the final song, "If We Only Have Love."

Five minutes of spontaneous, rhythmic clapping after the actors left the stage Saturday night told me what I wanted to hear.

Jacques Brel is alive and well in Van Nuys.