

# Pleasant it is, but Brel it isn't

**JACQUES BREL IS . . .** a collection of songs by Jacques Brel, produced by Laura Zücker, directed by Allan Miller, production conception and English lyrics based on Brel's lyrics & commentary by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman, music direction by Steven Bernstein, set by Rich Rose, costumes by Sylvia Mose, lighting by Leslie S. Rose, associate music director, Michael Zelenak, presented at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Thu-Sat, 2 & 7 p.m. Sun, through May 31. Tickets: \$13.50-\$17.50. Information: (818) 790-2240.

With Joseph Cardinale, Melissa Converse, Michael G. Hawkins, Geraldine Joyce and Thom Keeling.

## By Michael Lassall

Jacques Brel, the Belgian-born composer who managed to combine a fully saturated continental romanticism with the cynical vision of the 20th century in the medium of popular song, died in 1978 at the age of only 49. That the 23 songs of "Jacques Brel Is . . ." still seem so contemporary — even though all of them were written before 1968 and many quote musical antecedents that date back as far as the '20s — is testimony to their power.

"Jacques Brel Is . . ." (formerly known as "Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris") is now playing at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. It's a snappy 90-minute romp that brings the music before an L.A. audience for the first time in 10 years.

The very best thing about the production, of course, is the music. The terrific lyrics were rendered into English by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman for the original Greenwich Village production in 1968.

The melodies haunt, delight, creep in our ears and nestle near our hearts. Here is "Fils de" ("Sons of," that mournful Judy Collins hit of yesteryear: "Who is the child with no complaint?") and "Marieke" with its sad refrain of "In Flanders Field, in Flanders Field."

The finale is the no-holds-barred "If We Only Have Love" and the rousing "Amsterdam," which sounds like something out of "Happy End" (although it also perversely resembles a very, very different kind of song, "What Child Is This?"). So there are sad and happy songs, tangos and ballads and hokey numbers that manage to call up vaudeville and images of Al Jolson singing his lips off.

The set is likewise excellent, if a bit curious. Rich Rose's techno-pop collection of building materials borrowed from the conventions of postmodern architecture is a three-



From left, Melissa Converse, Michael G. Hawkins, Joseph Cardinale and Thom Keeling imbue "Jacques Brel Is . . ." with undeniable spirit.

Just what statement Rose and director Allan Miller are trying to make with the decor is unclear (unless it's that the songs go back in musical tradition and, at the same time, point forward, as the opening number, "Marathon," suggests). But it's strange to fabricate the materials of postmodernism (e.g., faux cinderblock, fake brick, simulated corrugated metal sheeting, phony marble and wood). After all, it is the very integrity of these materials that is being celebrated in architecture: their function, not just image.

This would be a point hardly worth mentioning if it did not serve as a perfect metaphor for the production as a whole.

Think of the songs as having the integrity of cinderblock. Think of the singers as approximating the function of singing. Think of the direction as offering the face and form of the songs, not their essence.

Oh, the five singers can all sing well enough, and in solos there is some evidence that each in his or her way has a voice that is appropriate to some Brel songs. But the voices are far from first-rate. Of the performers, only Michael Hawkins comes across as well-rounded.

Melissa Converse has a thin voice that sounds plaintive in the Piaf mode, but she has nothing like that depth of feeling, and the Aznavour-like Joseph Cardinale really just blusters his way through his numbers. Tenor Thom Keeling, who manages to pull off a few dance steps nicely, seems so paradoxically awkward on stage most of the time.

His voice, like that of the equally ungraceful Geraldine Joyce, is completely professional and completely uninteresting. Maybe these two just need a little seasoning.

And then there is musical direction by Steven Bernstein. It would seem that a musical director would know when voices do not blend, that he would not pair voices that have no business singing together

arrangements that do damage to the songs for that he would at least rearrange them if the songs demand talents not available.

A case in point: "Marieke." Most of the lovely song is sung as a solo by a very affecting Michael Hawkins. Then Joyce pokes her way on stage and utterly ruins it by singing over it in French (or is it Flemish?) And "Jef" ("You Are Not Alone") is a beautiful song for a woman to sing to her despondent mate. It is presented here as a duet by Joyce and Converse, a round about a half-measure off one from the other.

Miller's direction is equally ghastly. Every song is overstaged and oversold. It's delivered rather than sung. It's shoved down the throats of the audience as if the director trusted neither the songs nor the audience's sophistication.

If everybody would just calm down a little and simplify, simplify, the beauty of the songs could touch us. Put this much gilt on a lily, and all you're going to get is a weary bulb.

Michael Lassall regularly reviews theater for Style.