



Top row, Melissa Converse, left, and Geraldine Joyce. Bottom, Michael G. Hawkins, left, and Thom Keeling in "Jacques Brel."

AT THE BACK ALLEY

'BREL IS': REALLY JACQUES OR MERELY THE MOCK?

By SYLVIE DRAKE,
Times Theater Writer

Why a revival of "Jacques Brel" one might well ask? Perhaps the answer is why not?

After all, he was the demigod of the mid- to late '60s, a Belgian troubadour who took the world—and especially America—by storm and died entirely too young (he was only 49). His verve, romance and spirit captured the mood of the generations to follow—generations that reveled in his every note and word. So why "Jacques Brel" now?

Panache is panache and there's

always a place for it. Brel's lilting music and super-romantic lyrics are a rousing antidote for Heavy Metal and the dull prevailing pragmatism. The surprise at the Back Alley, where "Jacques Brel" opened last weekend, is how *alive* and how *well* Brel manages to be in the '80s, even if, in this instance, a little sea-changed to suit them.

Granted, the style of the French *diseur* is seemingly deathless—nostalgically reminiscent of too many silent or silenced eminences such as Charles Trenet and Edith Piaf. We get a whiff of it now and then from Charles Aznavour and

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more rarely still from the inimitable Yves Montand. But the music and the form live on.

Director Alan Miller's revival of "Jacques Brel Is . . ." (he's acknowledging our familiarity with the title which was "Alive and Well and Living in Paris") displays some updating of the Eric Blau/Mort Schuman translated lyrics—here and there, now and then—which neither deters nor adds much. Mostly, it serves to remind us that these are different, fancier, tougher and more selfish times—as do Rich Rose's semi-high-tech set and Sylvia Moss' lovely and *tres* Melrose Avenue costumes in burnished greens and blues and browns.

The effort goes an aggressive step further with interpretation. Miller seems determined to underplay Brel's sentimentality and find some vivid way to stage it that will minimize the slightest suggestion of sugar. Consequently, this revival is as wry and acerbic as it can be without taking Brel into another dimension.

This interpretation won't satisfy all tastes. For one thing, the talented company of five constitutes oddly disparate casting. In voice and appearance these performers are all very different. Miller also

seems to have placed more emphasis on individual achievement than on a synchromeshed sense of ensemble. Because of these marked departures from the past, the presence of the director—for good or bad—is palpable everywhere.

Middle-aged Joseph Cardinale stands out as perhaps the most uncommon bit of casting. His interpretation of "Mathilde" is that of a man in mid-life crisis madly in love with his poison. Of all the singers, Cardinale is the one who seems to work the hardest without quite succeeding in shaking a working-class image often at odds with its context. Miller has given him the solo "Next," however, which suits Cardinale down to his toes, and to which he brings a triumphant mixture of vigor and rue.

Michael G. Hawkins' "Funeral Tango" and especially "Jackie" ("Cute, cute, cute in a stupid-ass way") may be the richest interpretations of those satirical songs yet. The diminutive but large-voiced Thom Keeling gives us a life-enhancing "Fanette" and he and Hawkins in tandem do a super job of the humorous "Girls and Dogs" (a song absent from the original Brel show or album).

Geraldine Joyce, heartbreaking in "Marieke" (with Hawkins), tender in "Timid Frieda," very funny in "Brussels," has the look of a lean

Irish lass. And cool Melissa Converse has her most passionate moment in "I loved," but, in general, seems to be holding back.

Director Miller's cunning peaks with "Madeleine," which Cardinale, Hawkins and Keeling interpret as red-blooded competitors for the same effervescent young woman's attention. But it borders on the intrusive in "You're Not Alone," sung separately by Converse and Joyce at opposite sides of the stage, a half-beat apart, each woman addressing the man in her life.

As divergent as these singers are in flair, flavor, sound, style, size and shape, *la difference* here is not always a virtue, particularly not when it comes to really pulling together. One can respect Miller for trying a "Jacques Brel" as swift, vibrant and contemporary as this one, but here is one fan who can't help wishing for a bit of the old schmaltz. Some music and some lyrics demand to be lingered over.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys run Thursdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays 2 and 7 p.m., until May 31. Tickets: \$13.50-\$17.50 (818) 780-2240).

They share the stage with "Burke Byrnes: America's Finest," which plays Mondays through Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$10.50.

4/23/87

Los Angeles Times

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