

Theatre Review

Songs Of Brel

By Annemarie Donkin



Melissa Converse sings to Michael Hawkins in "Jacques Brel Is..." at the Back Alley.

A large and enthusiastic audience warmly greeted a new production of "Jacques Brel Is..." (Alive and Well and Living In Paris), at the Back Alley Theatre Saturday night. Set in a Club-like atmosphere, it is a delightful tribute to the late Belgian balladeer and his marvelous music. The show consists of 24 songs, all by Brel, about life, death, youth, age, love, loss, hope and humor, the entire spectrum of the human experience. Translated from the French by Eric Blau and Mort Shuman, each song is a veritable mini-musical drama in itself.

Performing these mini-dramas

are five talented singer/actors, who manage to express the full range of emotional depth and feeling of these songs. Leading the cast is Joseph Cardinale, who shines in "Next," "Middle Class," and the lusty "Port of Amsterdam." Melissa Converse is truly effective singing "My Death," and "I Loved." The show really brightens up though, with Michael G. Hawkins's interpretations of "Jackie," and the glib and sarcastic "Funeral Tango." Geraldine Joyce lent a sweet and sentimental voice to "Marieke," "Timid Frieda" and the rousing "Brussels." The real star that emerged, however, was Thom Keeling, whose beautiful and heart rending performance of "Faiette" would almost make it worth seeing the show again.

Individually the singers were fine, but their ensemble work could have been tighter, with stronger vocal harmonies. Director Allen Miller's heavy hand showed in some severely over-produced numbers which, lacking a clear purpose, created some confusion in the audience. A simpler approach would have served the music better. The very plain set, modern pastel costumes and the roving spotlight were effective. A fast paced, entertaining 90 minutes of variety and surprises. "Jacques Brel Is..." not to be missed! Performances are: Thurs. - Sat. at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. through May 31. The Back Alley Theatre is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys (1/2 block east of Sepulveda). For tickets and information call (818) 780-2240.