

ENTERTAINMENT

'Jacques Brel Is...' at the Back Alley Theatre

By **RON CLARY**
Contributing Writer

Most Americans are unfamiliar with the work of composer Jacques Brel. This is sad, because the Belgian entertainer, who passed away in 1978, left behind a collection of songs brimming with both the joy of love and the pathos of human mortality.

The Back Alley Theatre has provided Valley residents with the opportunity to discover Brel's work. It's current production of "Jacques Brel Is..." is an exuberant and energetic introduction to one of Europe's best songwriters.

The show is a collection of Brel's compositions, assembled by American composers Mort Shuman and Eric Blau, who also translated the lyrics.

Originally produced in New York in 1968, but not staged in Los Angeles more than 10 years, the musical review is a departure for the Back Alley and for director Allan Miller.

A cast of five talented singers present 24 songs, with themes ranging from the cycles of history to the importance of love.

It is difficult to point out specific highlights of a production that is of over-all high quality. Just the same,

several moments come to mind. Melissa Converse is delightfully tart as the former lover in "I Loved."

Perhaps the strongest part of the show is when the company perform together. This is particularly true with "Sons," the closing song of the first act. The song has been recorded as a solo balad in the past, most notably Judy Collins. The ensemble approach adds a special warmth and depth.

The Back Alley stage is small, and the audience is vitally linked with the cast and their evocative performances.

The work of musical director Steve Bernstein and associate Michael Zelnack is special in that one doesn't really take note that the cast is accompanied by only three musicians. Electronic enhancements are used sparingly, but to great effect.

In evaluating a musical production, I usually ask myself if I would buy a cast album if one were available. Here, the answer would be an unqualified "yes."

"Jaques Brel Is..." continues at the Back Alley through May 31, playing Thursday, Saturday at 8 p.m. and on Sundays at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m., call 780-2240.



Appearing in the Back Alley Theatre's current production of "Jacques Brel Is..." are (from left) Michael G. Hawkins, Melissa Converse, Geraldine Joyce and

Thom Keeling. This production, featuring the songs of the Belgian entertainer runs through May 31.