

**THIS "WALK" IS WORTH TAKING. IT'S A WINNER!**

A review by Archie Rothman

Basing a musical on a novel about prostitutes in New Orleans during the Depression is not as daring as it seems. There have been many musicals that have used the drama of hard times and sordid lives as material for great music theatre. From "Three Penny Opera" to "Cabaret" to "Chicago" and on and on.

Now we can add "A Walk On The Wild Side" to that list. Though very Weill and Brechtian in mood and spirit this "Walk" is strictly American. As it had to be with the writing, music and lyrics of Will Holt, based on the famous 1950s novel by Nelson Algren.

Many may know Will Holt from his many "folk song" and "Kurt Weill" albums he did in the '50s and '60s. Or from his Broadway shows like "The Me Nobody Knows". As a music and lyric writer, and as a theatre and cabaret entertainer, he has always proved to be a major talent. But in "A Walk On The Wild Side", now having its west coast premiere at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, he has finally found the vehicle that should label him forever as a brilliant stage musical creator.

In this musical play about the seamy, cut-throat street life in a starving and desperate big city he has found the plot and the people perfectly suited to his unique way with words and music. From torchy ballads to bar-room honky tonk to piano-roll ragtime, he has evoked the raucous, raunchy underworld of sluts, pimps, drifters and cheats in their bordellos and gutters.

As a respite from all this bleakness he injects bawdy songs and humor, and even a spoof on those early talkie musicals - complete with tap dancing and Busby Berkley routines. And all of it, remarkably, is faithful to the story and characters of Algren's novel.

Those who remember Hollywood's attempt to film the book will not recognize this version. In that "cleaned up" drama, released in the early 1960s, Barbara Stanwyck played the lesbianish madam of the establishment, Jane Fonda was the young "innocent" who falls into her clutches., while a much-too-old Laurence Harvey was the 20-year-old innocent who wanders into their world . And it was a disaster - with all the fury and fire of Algren's vision completely white-washed and distorted.

Here we have "A Walk On The Wild Side" that confronts the book's realism and honesty. Though song and dance have been added, they only serve to heighten the drama. Just as "Porgy And Bess" added new power and passion to the original "Porgy" novel. If Nelson Algren was alive today (he

passed away a few years ago while working on this musical with Holt) he would be very pleased.

And thankful that his memorable characters were left in the hands of a dedicated and talented cast.

Especially noteworthy is Jeb Brown. This 22-year old IS Dove Linkhorn, a young man from Texas who hopped a freight to New Orleans to find the fame and fortune that he feels is due him. Shoeless, penniless, illiterate, naive, but strong and handsome, he is befriended by the denizens of a struggling whorehouse who see him as an attraction in a live sex-show performed 5 times daily.

At first he resists. Sex to this teen-ager means love and tender feelings, especially with the older Mexican woman he had left behind in his small border town. But the temptation to make it big and be somebody important is too powerful and he accepts. With tragic results.

With money in his new jeans he decides to return to his former love. But the boss and a jealous crippled ex-fighter try to change his plans in the play's violent climax. A brutal fight leaves Dove blind. Somehow he finds his way back home, and into the waiting arms of his sweetheart.

Jeb Brown was in the original Off-Broadway workshop production, so he has had lots of time to perfect the demanding, pivotal role of the country boy innocent let loose in a cesspool of evil. Under less accomplished hands this part could have been one dimensional. Jeb infuses it with humor, style and magnetism. Once casting directors catch his performance he should be getting lots of calls for tv and film.

The other 11 performers are all basically new to their parts, yet their ensemble work under Patricia Birch, the original N.Y. director, and Alan Miller who co-directed, can't be better. Especially Hamilton Camp as the wily, crafty, street-smart survivor, Talya Ferro as Dove's Mexican sweetheart, Adrienne Barbeau (yes, she was "Maude's" tv daughter) as one of the girls, and Luise Heath (what a voice!) as the Madam.

The wonder of wonders is how this big cast can act, sing and dance up a storm during dozens of diverse scenes - all in the small space that is this 99-seat waiver theatre. Catch this "Walk" here in these intimate surroundings - at a \$14.50 to \$18.50 price - before it leaves for bigger and more expensive stages. As it surely will. It's that good.

The Back Alley Theatre is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Performances are 8 p.m. Thursdays, 7 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 14. For ticket information, call (818) 780-2240.

# Seen & Heard

by Archie Rothman

"Let's get it on stage NOW!" must be the cry right now from the over 150 waiver theatres in L.A. as they all scurry to beat the Equity deadline in mid-October. Then, all of those 99 seat or less stages will have to abide by the new waiver rules. Which might mean that many will have to close because of the financial and producing restrictions imposed on them.

So get 'em while the gettings good. Even great! Here are my picks for "must sees". At about a \$15.00 a ticket top, with the intimacy of seeing a play a few rows from the stage, they're the best entertainment buys around!

**A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE.** Nelson Algren's powerful 1950s novel of the depression Thirties has been turned into a "Three-Penny-Operaish" type of musical drama by actor/singer/writer Will Holt and the result is wonderful. Now having its West Coast premiere at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, "Walk" has been given an almost faultless production. The 12 member cast, featuring such star names as Adrienne Barbeau, Hamilton Camp, Luise Heath and Talya Ferro, are superb. In fact, everything about this sexy, sensuous musical is worth a visit. Especially the star-making performance of 22-year old Jeb Brown making his L.A. debut in the lead. And yes, there was a movie of the same name in the early '60s with Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Fonda and Laurence Harvey. But that white-washed, sterile Hollywood mess didn't do justice to the bold story of pimps, prostitutes and derelicts on New Orleans's skid row.

A bit about the Back Alley: This small theatre, tucked away in an alley just east of Sepulveda, has gained a reputation of consistantly offering provocative, exciting shows. Under the direction and producership of Alan Miller (also famous as a film and television actor) and his wife Laura Zucker, we have seen the world premiere of "The Fox" (which went to Broadway) and the start of plays starring Barbara Rush, Rue McClanhan, Jeff Goldblum, etc. Now sharing the Back Alley Stage (when "Walk" isn't on) is a musical review "Bittersuite" now in its 4th month. And like "Walk" it's the kind of theatre you won't find anywhere else but here.

*Back Alley Theatre is at 15231 Burbank Blvd. (east of the San Diego Freeway) in Van Nuys. Call 818-780-2240.*

## THE LADIES OF THE CAMELIAS.

There is always a greater risk in putting on a never produced play - especially if you're a struggling waiver theatre on Van Nuys Blvd. north of Sherman way. But the West End Playhouse has gambled and won. Their production of this brilliant world premiere has all the elements of a hit, with a great future beyond the confines of this 50-odd seat house.

Lillian Garrett, the author, has fashioned an entertaining and thought-provoking drama about a meeting between two great ladies of the theatre, Eleonora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, in Paris at the turn of the century. Playing these parts are 2 great actresses in their own right - Victoria Carroll and Melinda Peterson, ably assisted by Michael Bell and others.

What makes this casting, and the choice of the play, especially interesting is that Miss Carroll and Mr. Bell are the married couple who own the West End. For over 5 years they have built and managed their theatre with artistic integrity - never resorting to the obvious, over-produced box-office smashes of Broadway's past. As famous performers in films and television they wanted a venue that would give them a chance to express their theatrical talents and tastes without the compromises of popular "canned" vehicles.