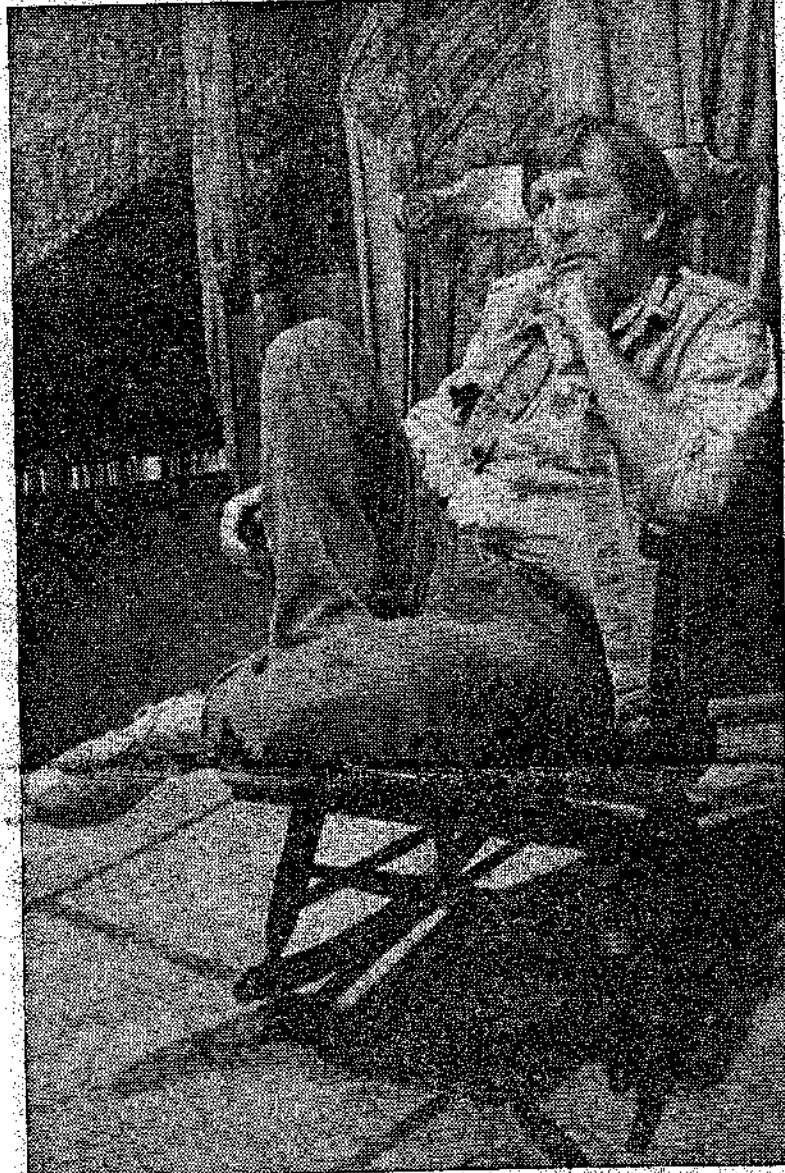


SCOTT GARRITY / DAILY NEWS



"I believe that the more the audience has to imagine, the more exciting it is," says Will Holt, whose musical "A Walk on the Wild Side" opens Thursday at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

Depression on the downbeat

Composer Will Holt takes 'Walk on the Wild Side'

By TOM JACOBS
Daily News Theater Writer

Trivia question No. 1: Where did the phrase "a walk on the wild side" come from?

Trivia question No. 2: Who wrote the classic folk song "Lemon Tree," which was popularized by Trini Lopez and Peter, Paul and Mary?

Trivia question No. 3, and this is the hard one: What do the answers to the first two questions have in common?

The correct answers are (1) the title of a novel by Nelson Algren, (2) Will Holt and (3) a new musical, "A Walk on the Wild Side," Holt's musical adaptation of Algren's novel of the Depression, opens this week at the Back Alley Theatre.

The show is, in a sense, 30 years in the making. Holt, a veteran of the New York theater, started work on it in 1957 in collaboration with novelist Algren. Author Studs Terkel introduced the two men to one another when Holt, then a folk singer, was playing at a Chicago club.

"I had just read the book, and I said I would really like to musicalize it," Holt recalled. "He got intrigued by the idea. I wrote five songs, and we started to work on an adaptation. We worked on it for a while, but people weren't ready for it."

That isn't surprising. The 1950s, as Holt recalled, were "a Doris Day world. Everything was very ironed."

Algren's was much more of a fumbled world — not a fit subject for the stage, let alone the musical stage.

According to Holt, no one

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Alley) with a friend of mine to see a show called "What's Wrong With This Picture?" I thought it was a lovely production. I liked the theater a lot.

"I went backstage and met Allan (Miller) and Laura (Zucker), the producing directors. They said they wanted a musical. I said, 'I've got one.' I sent them a tape from New York. Two days later they said, 'Let's do it.'"

They couldn't offer Holt a big budget or a big stage. But he isn't complaining.

"It is, in essence, a small musical," he said. "The actors play a variety of characters. The story is all over the place. If you made literal sets, you're gonna go crazy and it's gonna cost a fortune. Who needs it? This is about the big Depression, and I think you

THE FACTS

- **The play:** "A Walk on the Wild Side."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** Previews 2 and 7 p.m. today. Opens 8 p.m. Thursday. Regular schedule: 8 p.m. Thursdays, 7 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, through Nov. 14.
- **Starring:** Adrienne Barbeau, James Dybas and Hamilton Camp.
- **Behind the scenes:** Music, lyrics and book by Will Holt, based on the novel by Nelson Algren. Directed by Patricia Birch.
- **Tickets:** \$14.50 to \$18.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.

years ago in New York," he said. "There's an extremely talented, hungry group of actors and directors out here who are putting on interesting theater that you don't see in the big houses."

He has had much success in New York over the years, winning the Obie, Drama Desk and Outer-Critics Circle awards and receiving a Tony nomination. Among his shows are "Over Here!" — a vehicle for the Andrews Sisters — and "The Me Nobody Knows," a musical in which ghetto youngsters expressed their frustrations. Holt wrote the lyrics for that show.

"I had a lot of trepidation," he recalled. "I was white, middle-aged and fairly prosperous. Was I going to be able to connect with people who were poor, young and black? It was enormously successful. It was part of the new theater. I think we originated that kind of

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According to Holt, no one could accept the idea of a musical based on country and blues rather than traditional show music. And no one could conceive of a musical about the underclass. Algren's central character, Dove, is an illiterate drifter, a country boy who arrives in New Orleans and finds work in a house of prostitution.

Future didn't look rosy

"We heard, 'Please don't make (one of the characters) a legless man. Please don't have the kid blinded,'" Holt recalled. "I thought, 'This isn't going to work out.' (Algren) felt it wouldn't either, and we went our separate ways."

"When Nelson died in 1982, I thought, 'I wonder if the rights are available.' I found out they were. I started in again and finished it up."

Why stage its premiere here?

"We were looking for the next step (following last year's workshop production in New York)," he said. "I'm kind of bicastal. I happened to come (to the Back

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Cheap?

"Cheap. It's more honest that way."

"I also believe that the more the audience has to imagine, the more exciting it is. We can't compete with the movies."

The small Back Alley production will also give Holt another chance to tinker with the show. "(I want to) work on the dramatic values — keep on refining it until we get to the next step, which is presenting it with an orchestra," he said. At the Back Alley, the singers will be accompanied by two pianos.

Oddly enough, little of Holt's work has been seen in Los Angeles. The major exception is "Me and Bessie," a small-scale musical about Bessie Smith. Holt wrote the book for the show, which played the Taper with Linda Hopkins in 1974.

Nevertheless, he's a fan of Los Angeles theater.

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That sort of chance-taking musical isn't so welcome on Broadway any more, Holt said. He related a conversation he had with one major producer about "A Walk on the Wild Side."

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So is "Wild Side" a downer?

"Not to me, it isn't. But I go to the theater to be moved, to be excited. That is what entertains me. A lot of theater, in its effort to entertain, bores me. It doesn't give me chills. It doesn't give me what I'm looking for."

"I've found that the stronger, the more honest we get it, the more the audience will accept it. It's that strange thing: If you really go for the truth, go for the passion of the moment, audiences will buy it."