

THEATRE REVIEWS



ED KRUEGER

Adrienne Barbeau and Jeb Brown in Back Alley's 'Walk on the Wild Side'

A Walk on the Wild Side

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened Sept. 8; plays Thurs., 8; Fri.-Sun., 7; Sun. mat., 2; closes Nov. 20.

BY POLLY WARFIELD

As novelist Nelson Algren and the mythic hero of his tale decree, a walk on the wild side is much more theatrically exciting than a walk on the mild side. Which is evident and clearly shown in playwright-composer Will Holt's musical version of Algren's literary classic, here presented in its fully staged world premiere by an excellent ensemble, directed by Patricia Birch and Allan Miller. (Director-choreographer Birch also helmed the initial New York workshop production.)

The game and gritty flavor of 1930 Depression era Americana imbues the adventures of the kid Dove, beautifully played by Jeb Brown. Dove is Candide, or maybe Li'l Abner, rooted in his own time and place, the American south of the early 20th century. Dove's pure heart and invincible innocence keep him incorruptible in the most sordid circumstances; though he does wrong he stays unsullied. Beaten and blinded, there's a triumph in his final words, "Yeah but they couldn't kill me."

This quality of cockeyed optimism lightens the darkness of Algren's vision. Life can get awfully rough but it's still worth having. These are liars and cheats, takers and users, but they're survivors with a kind of jaunty insouciance. You can't hate them. Drifters and grifters, hoboes and harlots, pimps and panderers, they have a quality of their own. Flavor is the show's long suit. We think of *Cabaret's* hard glitter, Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, Studs Terkel's down-and-outers, Steinbeck's dispossessed. Visually these ladies of Perdido Street are Henri Cartier-Bresson's New Orleans brothel photographs in the flesh.

The company works flawlessly as ensemble. Brown's Dove, the illiterate orphan kid hometowners used to call "Useless," is strongly supported by Adrienne Barbeau as Hallie, the vivid

"lady in red" who wakes up sobbing from dreams of her dead child. She's your whore with heart of gold in a full-bodied Joan Crawford type role. James Dybas is sleazy, jaunty Finnerty, pimp without principle, particularly good in a deft dance number that humorously spoofs the grace and glamor of Astaire. Taylor Jenkins, Mary Pat Gleason and Diane Vincent join him in "The Loew's State and Orpheum," a rousing interlude. Talya Ferro is terrific as fine-boned, steely-spined Teresina, hash house *senora* who wins Dove's heart, the only incorruptible one in the bunch. Her "Shut Out the Night" is a scorcher and so is the "Cawfee man" song of Luise Heath, who plays Madame Lucille and others. Jenkins' Floralce is the professional virgin who performs with Dove as stud several times daily for Finnerty's peep-show patrons. (Finnerty complains he has "four girls, three rooms, a peephole and no business.")

Lauren Sterling is Kitty, a tough little waif who rides the rails and later makes her mark as top girl at the Rex Hotel. In a show long on irony, it's ironic that Alex Daniels, so splendidly kinetic recently as *Petruchio*, is now relatively immobile as Achilles Schmidt, a former circus strong man who lost his legs. His passionate love for Hallie and hers for him is a strong *leitmotif*. Hamilton Camp, short of stature, long on skill, is brothel procurer Fort, whose checkered career is mirrored in his weatherbeaten face. Richard Ryder's knockabout, cynical Byron is a bad influence on his kid brother Dove but a wonderful assist to the company. He gives the kid sere advice ("Never sleep with a woman worse off than you." "Watch out for friends, they're the ones who do you in.") He's so emphatically fine in the first act, we long to see more of him in the second. And somewhere along in the second act, the play suffers a lapse of momentum, which heretofore kept mounting nicely in a choreographic flow.

Don Gruber's set, a jumble of junk in a softly draped semi-circle, with mobile pieces that double as freight cars and platforms, is marvelously adaptable. Lawrence Oberman's lighting bathes it softly in rosy mauve, or dusky tones. Bob Miller's tattered, sleazy costumes are just what's needed. Musical direction and orchestration by Sam Kriger is excellent.

Playwright Holt, directors Miller and Birch, and this fine ensemble celebrate the late, neglected writer Nelson Algren and make his American fable theatrically viable in this exciting, distinctive musical drama. Perhaps best is, it underlines what Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. says was Algren's theme: "Persons unlucky and poor and not very bright are to be respected for surviving, although they often have no choice but to do so in ways unattractive and blameworthy to those who are a lot better off."

Lovesong

Presented by Hidden Hills Playhouse in association with Edmund Gaynes; produced by Nona Swerling; Hidden Hills Playhouse, 24549 Long Valley Rd., Hidden Hills; (818) 716-6600. Opened July 31; plays Fri., 8; Sat., 9; closes Sept. 24.

BY F. KATHLEEN FOLEY

To get to the Hidden Hills Playhouse you drive out the Ventura Freeway, west past Topanga to the sleepy, affluent, security gated community of Hidden Hills, which looks a lot like a studio backlot reproduction of the perfect American neighborhood. After a trek like this, one doesn't know what to expect. Surely the primary provinces of theatre are inner city storefronts and big Equity houses. Fearing the worst, you keep driving down the long, long, Long Valley Road until you pull up at an inauspicious little clubhouse (adjacent to a swimming pool) which houses the Hidden Hills Players. You walk in, take your seat—and receive a pleasant surprise.

Who would have thought to find a quartet of Broadway caliber voices in this remote outpost? Yet performers Howard Austin, Pamela Hall, Elisabeth Howard and Jon Rider possess just such stellar voices not to mention an impressive list of professional credits that distinguishes them from the suburban community theatre throng.

In this musical Michael Valenti, an established television and off-Broadway composer, has taken excerpts from love poems throughout the centuries and set them to his own original music. His "collaborators" range from Christopher Marlowe to Lord Byron to Dorothy Parker, the subject matter from hearts and flowers sentimentality to love betrayed. There are numbers about sacred love, profane love, love everlasting and love betrayed, the puppy crush love of the vain schoolgirl and the anguished love separated by death.

In fact, the thematic thread which connects the musical numbers could be loosely termed "love throughout the ages," not exactly the meatiest or most novel idea. However, although the show borders on the insubstantial, even *schmalzty*, at times Valenti's is a charming conceit. His best songs, like the riotous "Let the Toast Past," a drinking song based on a witty Richard Brinsley Sheridan poem, and the anguished "Blood Red Roses," John Lewin's lament on war, have the resonance of modern day folk classics.

Pamela Hall, one of the performers, has also taken on director's chores. Her staging is stilted. Occasionally the performers will cut a few capers but for the most part they face each other, stage center, and croon their undying love, like Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy frozen in a cinematic proscenium. However,

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