

# Entertainment

## You don't have to be Jewish to pen long-running musicals

By Dina Adler

Special to The Enterprise.

"Are you a galitzyaner or a Litvak?" asks Will Holt upon learning that his interviewer came from a Yiddish-speaking home. Holt, whose musical, "A Walk on the Wild Side," is running in Van Nuys, was referring to two Yiddish dialects spoken by Jews from different areas of Eastern Europe. Holt smiles as he recalls the many experiences in his personal and professional life that made him, a gentile, conversant with Jewish custom and language.

His first wife, Dolly Jonah, with whom he sang — including many of his own songs — at various coffee houses in New York City, was Jewish, as was his musical partner, folk singer, Martha Schlamme, with whom he toured in "A Kurt Weill Cabaret." In addition, Holt — a mini-Renaissance man — has also written a book (now out of print) about the Catskills "Kochalein's" (literally, "cook-for-yourself"), the cottages to which Jewish immigrant families fled in the summer to escape the New York City heat and see a bit of greenery.

A man who gives the cliché "quiet intensity" new meaning, Holt has strong opinions about almost everything; yet he is a good listener and accepting of divergent points of view. This acceptance of human differences has served him in good stead throughout his life, taking him from a meeting with Nelson Algren 30 years ago, through the '50s, '60s and '70s to the '80s, as he puts it "from Doris Day to Barbra Streisand."

Sensing immediately that, despite its downbeat plot, Algren's novel "Walk on the Wild Side" would make a fine musical, Holt waited — not always patiently — until the world was ready to share his point of view. The results are on view at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, where Holt's musical version of Algren's novel is being performed. He wrote and composed the work, which will run indefinitely.

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Although he has always liked all kinds of musical productions, Holt has a soft spot in his heart for those about the lower levels of society — like "Threepenny Opera" and "West Side Story." Drawn to Algren's depiction of "the underbelly of society," Holt, nevertheless, had "creative differences" with the novelist and an original project on which the two collaborated was abandoned.

It wasn't until Algren's death in 1982 that Holt was able to acquire the rights to the material and begin reviving his 30-year dream of a musical set in the Depression, having a cast of whores, pimps and thieves — desperate people living on the edge.

Composer and folk singer, Holt (perhaps his best known song is "Lemon Tree" of Peter, Paul and Mary fame) has received countless awards for his work in the theater including an Obie, the Drama Desk and Outer Critics awards, and a Tony nomination.

Delighted by the success of his current effort, the non-galitzyaner, non-Litvak, composer-lyricist smiles



Will Holt

as he shares a concluding tidbit with his visitor. "Nelson Algren was Jewish, too, you know," he says. "He didn't admit it, but it was true."