

'Wild Side' comes alive

By Herb Brin

Are they telling us something over at the Back Alley Theater on Burbank Boulevard, Van Nuys, by bringing up a



HARD TIMES MUSICAL — Jeb Brown and Talya Ferro in the Back Alley Theater production of *A Walk on the Wild Side*. There were, during the Great Depression, moments of tender love.

Depression era musical, box cars, brothels and hungers in New Orleans?

You won't come away from *A Walk on the Wild Side* singing "Brother can you spare a dime," but anyone who kicked the dust of the Great Depression way back in the 1930s will agree that Wilt Holt has come up with one helluva musical in his treatment of the Nelson Algren novel.

In time, as it often happens, even his songs may catch on.

Algren pulled out all the stops used by Brecht and Weil in their *Threepenny Opera*. The pimps of the Depression days are here, the whores, the panderers. And through it all, a pure-as-driven-snow love affair that warms the heart.

Oh how you'll sorrow for Dovid (Dove) Linkhorn who goes blind in a battle with Achilles Schmidt, a former circus strong man who is enraged when Dove goes to the hotel room of Hallie in order to learn to read. (Hallie, played by Adrienne Barbeau is fetching. And it is interesting to note that the illiterate Dove is played by Jeb Brown, a recent Yale graduate.)

This may be little theater, but in production it is big time indeed. Matter of fact, matter of fact, little theater in California is up there with the best Off-Broadway.

The program notes at Back Alley

Theater always come up with interesting slices of Americana. Will Holt met Nelson Algren 30 years ago in Chicago — introduced by Studs Terkel, of Division Street fame.

Studs befriended lots of struggling writers, including one Herb Brin and a feller named Orin Tavaroff.

Holt was fascinated by Algren's 1955 novel of the Depression era, the hard times, the seamy sides of life in Texas and New Orleans. It took Holt all these years to bring *Walk on the Wild Side* to life on stage.

The program notes also include some thoughts on Nelson Algren by Kurt Vonnegut Jr., a former City Press reporter in Chicago.

Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*) tells how Algren had been paid a pittance for his stories and novels which included *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

Frank Sinatra made a bundle with the *Golden Arm* film.

Vonnegut added that Algren in effect said, in writing about dehumanized Americans during the Depression: "Hey — an awful lot of these people your hearts are bleeding for are really mean and stupid. That's just a fact. Did you know that?"

There ought to be a revival of interest in Nelson Algren's books. It might save us from a repeat of the gosh-awful days of the Great Depression.

Great — my eye!
Go and see the play.