

Stage Review

'Walk on the Wild Side'

Back Alley Theatre

Closes November 21

By ED KAUFMAN

When American novelist Nelson Algren sat down to write his novels, the subject matter was always the seamier side of America — the place of pimps and whores, the underbelly of our country — the terrain of Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski. Someone called Algren's vision that of an outlaw mentality: a hard-hitting and relentless forager of the real everyday truths underneath our glitzy and glossy world of surfaces.

So when writer-composer Will Holt sat down to adapt the materials to Algren's sordid and seedy Depression-era novel "A Walk on the Wild Side" in 1958, things became bogged down in an America still living in the seeming euphoria of the post-war years. Now, three decades later, life has caught up to art, and the Algren/Holt pilgrimage has finally settled into the Back Alley Theatre, where the world premiere of "A Walk on the Wild Side" has turned into a stage piece.

And it's well worth seeing, despite some flaws, especially in Act II when the emotional side of things seems to come unraveled. Still, the Brechtian production is creative, daring and

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full of onstage energy, thanks to the imaginative staging and direction of Patricia Birch and Alan Miller; the movable set by Don Gruber; lighting design by Lawrence Oberman; costumes by Bob Miller; and the musical direction of Sam Kriger. Artistically, it's a show full of spit and polish.

As for its subject matter, "A Walk on the Wild Side" is vintage Algren: the story of an illiterate country boy Dove (a convincing portrayal by Jeb Brown) who leaves his good-for-nothing brother (Richard Ryder) and his Mexican lover (the first-rate Talia Ferro) for the seductive promises of New Orleans. Very much like Voltaire's *Candide* and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Dove is the innocent in search of experience, in this case the elusive American Dream of promise and fulfillment.

Soon he's acting as the stud for peep-show erotic thrillseekers at a whorehouse in New Orleans, where he enacts his ritual (the seduction of a "virgin") among the whores (Adrienne Barbeau, Mary Pat Gleason, Diane Vincent, Taylore Jenkins),

their madam (Luise Heath), a young waif (Lauren Sterling), the pimps and the panderers (James Dybas and Hamilton Camp). In a sense, all are fringe people, the people that Algren knew best of all.

An opportunist, Dove, much like Sophocles' Oedipus, is riding high. But there's a price to be paid as he encounters Achilles (a moving portrayal by Alex Daniels), an ex-circus strongman who lost his legs on the tracks of the Santa Fe railroad and is loved by Hallie (Barbeau). Soon there's a confrontation and Dove is blinded, and limps back to his Mexican lover, becoming, again like Oedipus, a man with insight if not eyesight. Dove also has a large dose of Algren's indomitable spirit about life.

Adapter Holt has written a fine 21-song score that includes everything from New Orleans blues to ragtime, from minstrel to a Broadway chorus routine, all blended with some moving lyrical duets. Standouts are Barbeau, Camp, Daniels, Dybas, Gleason and Heath. All the company sings and acts with the best of them in this dark — yet, at times, humorous — adaptation that took 30 years in coming.