

STAGE LIFE



ADRIENNE BARBEAU and Alex Daniels "perform" for voyeurs in this scene from Will Holt's "A Walk on the Wild Side," continuing through mid-November at the Back Alley Theater. Information: (818) 780-2240.

THE GOOD LIFE—Independent-Journal Newspapers/Westside Life/Marina Mail —Week of Sept 22 thru Sept 28 1988—

'A Walk on the Wild Side'

Energy, Originality Grip New Musical

When composer/lyricist/writer Will Holt set out to adapt Nelson Algren's Depression-era novel, "A Walk on the Wild Side," he was following a trail blazed by such as Kurt Weill, Berthold Brecht, John Gay and John Steinbeck, all of whom wrote and/or composed about the seamier side of life. Algren's unblinking look at the desperate means by which some not very nice people survived in 1931 isn't pretty, but it has the flavor of truth about it. As in Genet's "The Balcony," life is a whore house, this one located in the hot, humid city of New Orleans, and well-staged at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys in a world premiere.

Dove Linkhorn (Jeb Brown), an illiterate young stud, leaves his older Latina lover, Terasina (Tanya Ferro) in Texas and heads for New Orleans and the bright lights. He ends up as a stud-for-hire in the brothel presided over by Finnerty (James Dybas), a sleazeball assisted by an equally slimy lackey named Fort (Hamilton Camp). Dove's work consists of deflowering the same "virgin" five times a day for the entertainment of voyeurs who pay \$10 apiece to watch through peep holes.

For providing this edifying spectacle, Dove is paid well by his standards. He finally has some money, but what he wants most is to be able to read. One of the whores, Kitty (Lauren Sterling) teaches him. Kitty happens to be the girl friend of strong man Schmidt (Alex Daniels), both of whose legs were abruptly amputated by the wheels of a Santa Fe train. Still enormously strong, he attacks Dove with tragic results. Brown is a fine actor.

**Maurice
Keller**

The other whores are Hallie (Adrienne Barbeau) Reba (Mary Pat Gleason), Lucille (Luise Heath), Floralee (Taylor Jenkins), and Frenchy (Diane Vincent). All turn in sharply defined characterizations that give us insights into the life of the *demi-monde*. Richard Ryder gives us another kind of sleaze as Dove's older, destitute and thieving brother. He's fine at it. Talya Ferro, well known from over 30 guest shots on Johnny Carson's show, plus many others, gives a sensitive portrayal of a minority person in a bigoted Texas. And her singing of a lovely "Shut Out the Night" is a high spot.

This brings us to Will Holt's music and lyrics. Known for his big hit, "Lemon Tree," Holt brings talent, taste and experience to his task, and the result is a score of distinction. The songs, especially those early in Act One, have some of the acidic quality of Kurt Weill, albeit with Holt's personal stamp. The opening, for instance, where hoboes sing "Stay Away From Waycross," listing those towns unsafe for impoverished knights of the road, has much bite both musically and lyrically. Another song, "That Old Piano Roll," by its very subject an invitation to write cliches, emerges from Holt's hands as a work of surprising quality and interest, glowing with originality. "The Common Kind," sung by Dove and Terasina, the title song (a rouser!), "Fancy Nighttime Women" (Schmidt and Hallie), "That Boy Can Read" (Lucille), "Strong Man's Song" (Schmidt) and others establish Holt as a craftsman of standing.

Sam Kriger's musical direction and accompaniment is splendid. Staging and direction by the noted Patricia Birch ably assisted by Allan Miller does much to give the show a highly polished, well-paced production. Set (Don Gruber), lighting (Lawrence Oberman) and costumes (Bob Miller) are imaginative and appropriate.

Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys (just east of 405). Thurs. 8 p.m.; Fri.-Sun. 7 p.m.; Sun. mat. 2 p.m. \$14.50-\$18.50. (818) 780-2240. Ten weeks starting Sept. 8.