

Haunting 'Wild Side'

Nelson Algren's downbeat novel ultimately uplifts

By Terry Fisher



From left, Jeb Brown and Talya Ferro in musical adaptation of *A Walk on the Wild Side*.

A slightly dissident piano bangs out the overture with a nervous, urgent, driving quality. People wander onto the stage: filthy, ragged huns riding the rails and painted, smiling prostitutes. They are moved around on wheeled platforms which form set pieces as well as railroad cars. Thus begins Will Holt's musical adaptation of Nelson Algren's novel, *A Walk on the Wild Side*, set in the Depression days of 1931.

The production, now at the Back Alley Theater, encompasses a mostly dynamite cast of players whose faces haunt and taunt you, an eclectic score that rings with heartbreak and humor, and staging (by Patricia Birch and Allan Miller) that aptly suits Algren's downbeat but ultimately uplifting work.

Teen-aged, illiterate Dove Linkhorn (played with bravado and triumph by Jeb Brown) leaves his Texas roots and his Mexican lover, Terasina (Talya Ferro), behind to travel the freight cars to New Orleans, filled with the desire to be somebody. "I don't know what kinda great I am gonna be, but I'm a born world shaker," he gloats. What he finds at the Rex Cafe are the dregs of humanity eking out a living by preying on the hopes and weaknesses of

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others.

Pimp Finnerty (James Dybas) uses and abuses his girls and drifters with malevolent amusement. One of the scheming hangers-on, Fort (Hamilton Camp), has all the feelings of a rusty knife blade. The prostitutes (Mary Pat Gleason, Diane Vincent, Taylor Jenkins, Adrienne Barbeau), shepherded by Madame Lucille (Luise Heath), are almost as tough. Achilles Schmidt (Alex Daniels), who had to give up circus life when the Santa Fe Railroad took his legs, is hatefully bitter. Kitty Twist (Lauren Sterling), a feisty, bloodless hobo, joins the group.

Thrust into the seamy, seedy life, Dove eventually comes to revel in his newfound success. One of the prostitutes teaches him to read, a glorious triumph for him. "I know words, everybody!" he exults. Determined to return to Terasina, he stops at the Rex Cafe, against the advice of the kindly Madame Lucille, for a last goodbye, where a violent brawl with Achilles results in the ultimate irony.

Dove discovers he has a heart, but at times we wonder if the production does. As gripping as the story is, and as powerful as the musical numbers are, there are static moments when a song interrupts the dialogue rather than flowing from it. The parts seem greater than the whole. Midway through Act Two, *Walk* finds its heart and the heart of its audience as well.

Brown gives a full-bodied portrayal as Dove with all the insinuating innocence and boundless optimism of youth. By contrast, Camp as Fort, and Richard Ryder as Byron are cynical and calculating to the core. Camp is particularly riveting, his lined face and piercing eyes mirroring every blow that life dealt him.

James Dybas adds the creation of Finnerty to his roster of distinctly crafted roles (*Pacific Overtures*, *Carousel*). His dancing is tops, particularly so in "The Loew's State and Orpheum," an exultant paen to the old 25-cent movie and stage show days with its Busby Berkeley bit.

Holt has written some terrific songs. The cynical exuberance of "Little Darlin'," the sexual innuendos in "Cawfee Man" (superbly rendered by Heath), the desperate "Doll-

Bill" (sung with ferocity by Camp), a biting "The Life We Lead" are stand-outs in the score. The choreography (undoubtedly Birch's) underscores the heartbreak and the short-lived joy. Technical credits are also excellent; Sam Kruger's musical direction and orchestration, Don Gruber's grubby set, Lawrence Oberman's moody lighting and Bob Miller's ragged costumes. With smoother transitions and a few darker edges, *Walk* can be a runaway hit. ■

A Walk on the Wild Side, Back Alley Theater 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys (818-780-2240). Plays Thurs., 8 p.m., Fri.-Sun., 7 p.m., with Sun. matinee, 2 p.m., through Nov. 14.

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