

This is Robert Windeler, with Thoughts on Theatre.

"A Walk on the Wild Side" is a pretty big musical in a pretty small theatre, the Back Alley, also in Van Nuys, but it mostly works, thanks to some nifty gritty songs by composer lyricist Will Holt, a committed cast and exuberantly controlled staging by Patricia Birch. Turning Nelson Algren's novel of small-town Texas to New Orleans underbelly during the Depression into a musical was a tall order to begin with. There are lots of characters and the subject matter is hardly upbeat. Holt, who also wrote the libretto, introduces a few too many of these characters, gives them each a song or so, then leaves their stories hanging at the end. The one tale that is played out is that of Dove Linkhorn, who says he's "a born world-shaker," but ends of selling his body in a New Orleans brothel. Jeb Brown plays Linkhorn a bit too much like a Huck Finn who's taken a wrong tributary of the Mississippi on his raft. This particular fall from idealism demands more than "Aw shucks." But most of the other players are believable in their slides into sleaze, especially Hamilton Camp as Fort. Because Holt has a few too many characters, there are also a few too many songs, even if most of them are good songs. I especially liked "That Old Piano Roll," which does finally get the play going after a slow start, the bawdy "Cawfee Man," Camp's solo, "Dollar Bill" and the Act Two opener, "The Loew's State and Orpheum," Birch's Busby Berkleyesque tribute to 30s movie palaces. Danced and sung by three hookers and their pimp, this staging alone makes "A Walk on the Wild Side" worth seeing. Don Gruber's fluid set pieces are also major contributors to the success of this show.

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Achilles Schmidt, a crippled former circus strong man, is involved in a painful love affair with Hallie, one of the whores. Tragically, Dove's friendship with Hallie results in a fight that changes his life.

The music is described as a blend of Country and Western with New Orleans blues, and that is an apt description. It works! The songs echo the pain, despair, hopes and dreams of these desperate characters. Man reaches out to music with both joy and anguish and A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE lends itself to the music.

I had a little difficulty with the set -- large platforms on wheels which represented trains and beds that the actors had to keep rolling around, but then, even though The Back Alley is air-conditioned, I saw ~~it~~ <sup>this play</sup> on the hottest day of the summer, so maybe I was cranky.

Certainly, A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE, co-directed by Allan Miller and Patricia Birch, is worth seeing. It is at The Back Alley Theatre at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys, Thursdays at 8, Fri., Sat. & Sun. @ 7, Sun. matinee at 2. <sup>thru Nov. 14th</sup> Call (818) 780-2240. Prices are from \$14.50 to \$20.00. Ask them about their Thursday night Talkbacks.