

WESTSIDE / VALLEY

## 'A Walk on the Wild Side' for Yale-Educated Jeb Brown

By JANICE ARKATOV

Making his Broadway debut at age 10 as one of the no-neck monsters in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" was notable on several counts for Jeb Brown.

"I was very impressed with the fact that the man playing my father—Fred Gwynne—had been Herman Munster," he recalled. "That was a big deal. And we got to go to parties, meet Tennessee Williams. The other advantage of being a kid was being able to hang out in Elizabeth Ashley's dressing room and see her in her slip."

These days, the actor is spending more time on stage than in dressing rooms, playing 17-year-old Dove Linkhorn, an illiterate, open-hearted country boy who weathers interracial romance, sex shows, bar brawls and blindness in Will Holt's musical adaptation of Nelson Algren's Depression-era novel "A Walk on the Wild Side" (at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys).

"In the book, Dove works a bit more on instinct—because he doesn't speak very much," noted Brown, 24. "And he's really down and out; it describes him as having bad teeth and long, reddish hair. I worried there for a while, because the script had all these people calling me 'Red.'"

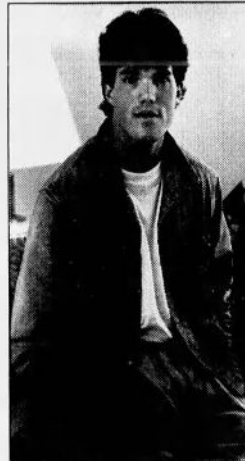
"But beyond that, we have a lot in common. We're both long on appetites—for life experience, wanting to get out there and do it. And 17 wasn't that long ago. I remember it fondly."

At 17, Brown was in his native Greenwich, Conn., enjoying an acting career that had begun in community theater when he was 9.

"From a very early age, I was performing in my living room for family functions: a little singing, a little dancing, a whole lot of acting—and acting out," he reminisced. "There were no actors in the family, and it certainly wasn't my parents' idea." But during the Broadway run of "Cat," "my mother appreciated theater enough to commute with me to Manhattan eight shows and six days a week."

After that, he did commercials—everything from Prudential Insurance to Tab. "Some were wonderful; some were not so wonderful," he said. "The worst was one for Clearasil, which ran five times every day after school."

Brown's next Broadway stint was in "Bring Back Birdie" (the 1980 sequel to "Bye, Bye, Birdie"), a run that began on a Thursday and ended Saturday. "But we did have a month and a half of previews," he said cheerfully. "So in a way, I had the most valuable part of the



ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

**Jeb Brown portrays an illiterate, open-hearted cowboy in "A Walk on the Wild Side."**

experience. There were those who were crushed when we closed—and I was not pleased—but I was also happy to get back to school, salvage the year, not fall behind."

The actor salvaged his studies enough to get into Yale, which he viewed as "an opportunity to discover other things." He said he didn't try out for any plays, but kept his foot in the door. "And I enjoyed myself in many, many other ways. But little by little, I felt the itch come back, and that acting wasn't just something familiar and that's why I loved it, but that my heart was really in it."

It was shortly after graduation that Brown heard about the auditions for "Walk," which were being staged in a workshop production in New York. The role description: a young James Taylor, 17, barefoot.

"I went in my most worn jeans and sang a country tune," he said. "Actually, I was initially in the 'out' pile; I was seen as having an attitude."

"Later, when Pat Birch was going through that pile, she said, 'What about this guy?' " (Birch was the co-director.) "Two weeks into rehearsals, she said, 'Jeb, I keep waiting for this attitude, but I just don't see it.' It turned out that they'd mixed me up with some other guy. So I almost didn't get the part because of someone else's attitude."

Brown expresses few qualms over the prospect of originating a role in a new, untried piece. "It's exciting, difficult and exciting," he said. "I work hard on stage. But I also think I have an easier time, because I come out in the beginning and play the through line for two hours. The other people have to go let off steam in the dressing room, change their clothing and hair. But I just go out there and do it."

The actor has only nice things to say about his co-stars.

"Twelve new friends—and 12 couches," he said with a grin, referring to the house-hopping that's been going on till he establishes regular housing. □