

**STAGE REVIEW**

## Change of Tune for 'Walk on the Wild Side'

By SYLVIE DRAKE,  
*Times Theater Writer*

**A**n American musical about, if you'll pardon the expression, the Great Depression?

A couple of decades ago such an idea would have been unthinkable. No matter how much Cole Porter insisted that "Anything Goes," anything didn't. But times change and the thread of those tainted, biting musicals launched in Europe by Brecht and Weill ("Mahagonny," "The Threepenny Opera") was picked up by America's Stephen Sondheim. A musical about a killer barber didn't sound like much of a prospect either, until one saw and heard "Sweeney Todd."

Composer-writer Will Holt is the first to admit that no one had much faith in his intention to turn Nelson Algren's "A Walk on the Wild Side" into a musical. Yet on the evidence of Sunday's press preview at the Back Alley Theatre (the show opens officially tonight), the doubting Thomases were wrong.

**I**t's a terrific idea. Has Holt pulled it off? The taint is there; the bite not quite. There's room to darken and deepen this "Walk," but much of the hard work is done.

Nothing is harder, after all, than to take a sprawling novel and confine it to the stage. By using a fluid format and a couple of rolling platforms (in Don Gruber's simple design they become the freight cars, brothels, bars and cafés of 1930s Texas and New Orleans), Holt has painted a living portrait with not much more than a few selective strokes and some vivid, catchy lyrics.

The music is another matter—a touch on the mild side, or does it only *seem* that way because it's delivered at the Back Alley on a piano that sounds like the Little

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# 'WILD SIDE'

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Engine That Could?

For all its colorful pimps and whores and cut-throat Depression background, "Walk on the Wild Side" is fundamentally a latter-day "Candide." It's the story of Dove Linkhorn (Jeb Brown in a master-stroke of casting), a strapping innocent from Texas whose open spirit navigates the rapids of poverty, women and booze with not much more than a smile and winning manner. But Algren knew the reality of those times and Holt knows enough to respect it.

Dove eventually is brought down by the company he keeps, yet despite the severity of the blow, his spirit remains unbowed.

This semi-happy ending is given an almost idyllic apotheosis in Holt's adaptation.

While Dove's triumph over adversity is real, so is the devastation. But without a more sardonic approach, the shock of the events that bludgeon the young man's life isn't as stark as it ought to be. Holt uses soft shades of gray where he needs bursts of red and black.

We're talking of a buoyant young life smashed by brutality and betrayal. Lovely ballads such as "Shut Out the Night" and playful ones such as "Don't Put Me Down for the Common Kind" lay the groundwork for romance.

Bouncy, jagged extrapolations such as "That Old Piano Roll" and "The Rex Cafe," and even the wily "Ingenuity," create the Depression backdrop—not through clenched teeth, but with tongue in one cheek. By Act II, however, we need something more insidious than ragtime. We need "Mack the Knife."

Holt reaches for something like that. "The Loew's State and Orpheum" and "Fancy Nighttime Women" are headed in the right direction, but they never really get there. That the piece ends on a note of love triumphant is uplifting; it also scuttles whatever effort at darkness and hard edges might have preceded it.

Despite these arguable choices (matters of mood, not honesty), the staging at the Back Alley is smart, energetic and performed by a cast that can sing, act and dance. Noteworthy in it—aside from the seductive Brown—are Talya Ferro as the Latina café owner who first takes on the education of Dove Linkhorn; Alex Daniels as a legless former circus strong man who becomes Dove's nemesis, and Adrienne Barbeau as the introspective hooker who is the second woman to take an interest in Dove's educa-



Jeb Brown, Talya Ferro in musical "A Walk on the Wild Side."

tion—with unforeseen results.

Holt gets excellent help from his friend Patricia Birch, who directed and choreographed with Allan Miller. Birch's strong work is evident everywhere on the small Back Alley stage, proving that lots of space is not essential to decent dancing (though the tapping of the tap numbers could be more distinct; is it the shoes or the surface?).

Bob Miller's costumes are on target, as is Lawrence Oberman's lighting. It makes a contribution to the nervous mood of the piece that one wishes were equaled by more

of the music. One might also wish for a three- or four-piece band instead of that solo piano. But wishes are wishes.

In the end, the future of this "Walk" depends on Holt's willingness or ability to take his fidelity to Algren's novel one step further and turn what is now mild and playful into something mordant and, as the title promises, wild.

At 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, Thursdays, 8 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m.; Sundays, 2 and 7 p.m. Indefinitely. Tickets: \$14.50-\$18.50, (818) 780-2240.



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