

Saturdays at 10:30 p.m. at the Cast Theater.

★★½

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Songs in the Key of Life

According to composer Will Holt, when he approached Nelson Algren 30 years ago with the idea of adapting his Depression-era novel, *A Walk on the Wild Side*, into a musical, the novelist replied, "A musical with a legless man and a guy who goes blind?"

Algren's point is well taken. Look at what a campy, turgid mess was made of the book by Hollywood. (Good soundtrack, however.) And yet, Holt's concept of using a cabaret format to tell the story of an illiterate Texas boy who finds fortune of a sort as a stud in a New Orleans bordello is truer to the spirit of the novel than one might expect. This singing-and-dancing *Walk*, which was shaped at New York's Musical Theater Workshop and is now having its world premiere at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, is obviously more ambitious than the usual 99-seat theater fare. The good news is that its ambitions are largely met.

Holt, who wrote the folk pop song "Lemon Tree" and who created "Me and Bessie" with Linda Hopkins, as well as the lyrics for "The Me Nobody Knows," has crafted a number of catchy songs, most of them bluesy or barrelhouse, and one or two moving ballads. It's a solid score that is considerably better than several that have found their fans on Broadway (*Big River* and *Shenandoah* leap to mind). And Holt has even concocted a tune from some of Algren's most-quoted tenets: "Stay away from empty car seats / Truck stops that say 'Eats,' / Men who want to give you drinks for free / Card players named Doc / Drunken broads who talk / And never cop another fella's plea." His collaborator on the project, Patricia Birch (she staged dances for *Grease*, *Pacific Overtures* and *Candide* on Broadway and directed the movie *Grease II*), choreographed the action here and codirected with the Back Alley's producing director, Allan Miller.

The cast has its share of familiar faces. Hamilton Camp, one of the few great character actors in film and onstage, proves in the role of the drifter-entrepreneur Fort how crucial that designation can be. The songs he sings, in duet with Richard Ryder, who portrays the protagonist's brother, and with the company depend in large part on his practiced folksinger voice as well as his unflagging vitality. And his solo number, "Dollar Bill," is one of the show's

highlights. Talya Ferro (for whom Antonio Carlos Jobim wrote "Wave") is alternately poignant and fiery as a Mexican girl who gives the protagonist a reason to live. And Adrienne Barbeau, who has seen more than her share of hard gals and hookers, manages to embody the prostitute Hallie with a few new nuances.

As the protagonist Dove Linkhorn, Jeb Brown, who recently graduated from Yale but who made his Broadway debut as one of the no-neck monsters in the 1975 revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, is reprising the role he created in the workshop production. With a face so sculptured he looks like a Hirschfeld caricature of himself, Brown tears into the part with perhaps a bit too much youthful vigor, even for the character. But this is an excess that should be easy to tone down, considering that he handles the singing chores quite well. Alex Daniels is the moody ex-circus strongman who lost his legs to a train. Holt provides him and Barbeau with a fine dark love duet, which consists mainly of them professing their lack of feeling for each other.

Mary Pat Gleason, Luise Heath, Taylor Jenkins and Diane Vincent are the other ladies working for the sinister pimp Finnerty, convincingly limned by James Dybas. And Lauren Sterling is the underage Kitty Twist, who can't wait to become a prostitute.

Don Gruber constructed the versatile and apparently inexpensive set in which beds are transformed into freight cars pushed by cast members, and Lawrence Oberman's lighting design goes a long way in making the scenery seem more substantial than it is.

One shouldn't approach *A Walk on the Wild Side* expecting to find a show that's ready for Broadway. But considering its many accomplishments and attractions, only minimal fixing should be needed for it to have a successful Equity run in its future.

★★★½

ON DISC

As anyone with half an ear can tell, this is Irving Berlin's centennial year. And at least three record companies have seized the opportunity to press memorial collections. The Columbia CD has an overabundance of Big Band arrangements of the Broadway composer's familiar melodies and is by far the weakest collection. The other two each have their own strong points. RCA's *The Irving Berlin Songbook* contains the most selections, 15 of them. And the performers are certainly a varied lot. Kate Smith sings the song she