

In review

'Wild Side' set to music

By DINA ADLER
Special to The News Chronicle

Will Holt's musical, "A Walk On The Wild Side," now at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, paints a picture of the underbelly of society — its pimps, prostitutes and general down-and-outers in a Texas town during the Depression.

Because one of the characters is legless and many of the others are brash and coarse, the production often appears to be a cross between "Porgy and Bess" and "The Threepenny Opera" — a sad tale of down-and-out love coupled with a startling tale of human beings hanging on by their fingernails to a bleak and narrow existence.

We meet Dove, an illiterate country boy (expertly portrayed by Jeb Brown) who is taught to read by Hallie the whore (sensitively acted by Adrienne Barbeau) only to be blinded in a fight. Barbeau, whom many remember only as Bea Arthur's assertive daughter in the TV series "Maude," shows us both her versatility and her fine singing voice in this demanding role. Brown is outstanding, among a particularly good cast, as is Alex Daniels as Achilles Schmidt, the crippled but still belligerent former circus strong man who gives Dove his comeuppance.

Holt's music and lyrics are a blend of the best of country and blues, which effectively underscore the mood and plot line of this Nelson Algren novel which Holt spent many years bringing to the stage.

Although one character in the novel says that "the poor are

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Adrienne Barbeau and Jeb Brown at Back Alley Theatre.

the true absolved of the earth," Holt, in a conversation with some visitors after the play, said that he saw Anne Frank's quotation that "People are still

basically good at heart" as being even more relevant to the attitudes and actions of his (and Algren's) characters. Although these people are desperate, they

are never hopeless and, in their own way, they believe in a better future for themselves.

Holt sees musicals like this one as a reaction to the massive productions so popular today — like "Les Miserables" and "The Phantom of the Opera" — a reaction that "strips the

musical" back to its bare essentials: "a fusion of theater, music and dance into one instrument of expression."

"A Walk On The Wild Side" will continue for 10 weeks. Show times are at 8 p.m. Thursdays and 7 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Sunday matinees are at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$14.50 Sundays and Thursdays, \$15.50 Fridays and \$18.50 Saturdays. For information call (818) 780-2240.