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TheaterWeek™

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*Cover: Charlotte Rae and Cleo Laine get
 their wishes in Into the Woods. (Photograph by
 Martha Swope.)*
*This page: Cleo Laine as Princess Puffer,
 with Betty Buckley, George Rose, and
 members of the Broadway cast of The Mystery
 of Edwin Drood. (Photograph by Martha
 Swope.)*

Walking the Wild Side

Will Holt has dreamed for 30 years of turning Nelson Algren's novel into a musical—will the Back Alley Theater production help spread the word?

by Rob Stevens

It has taken 30 years, but Will Holt has finally accomplished his dream of turning Nelson Algren's novel *A Walk on the Wild Side* into a musical for the stage. A workshop production at New York's Musical Theater Workshop done last January was followed by a full production at Van Nuys' Back Alley Theater in suburban Los Angeles last fall, an event that everyone involved hopes will prove a step on the road to further productions and a life in regional and commercial theaters.

Will Holt began his career as a folk singer and composer whose songs include "Lemon Tree," "Sinner Man" and "One of Those Songs." His theater work includes book material and/or lyrics for *A Kurt Weill Cabaret*, *Me and Bessie*, about blues singer Bessie Smith, with Linda Hopkins; *Over Here!*, the neo-'40s musical with the Andrews Sisters; *Taking My Turn*, a revue about the joys and sadnesses of growing older; and *The Me Nobody Knows*, about the inner lives of inner city children. He has received an Obie, the Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Awards, and a Tony nomination for his work on the latter two productions.

His involvement with the Algren work has occupied three decades. "It was 1958. I was performing in Chicago. Studs Terkel introduced me

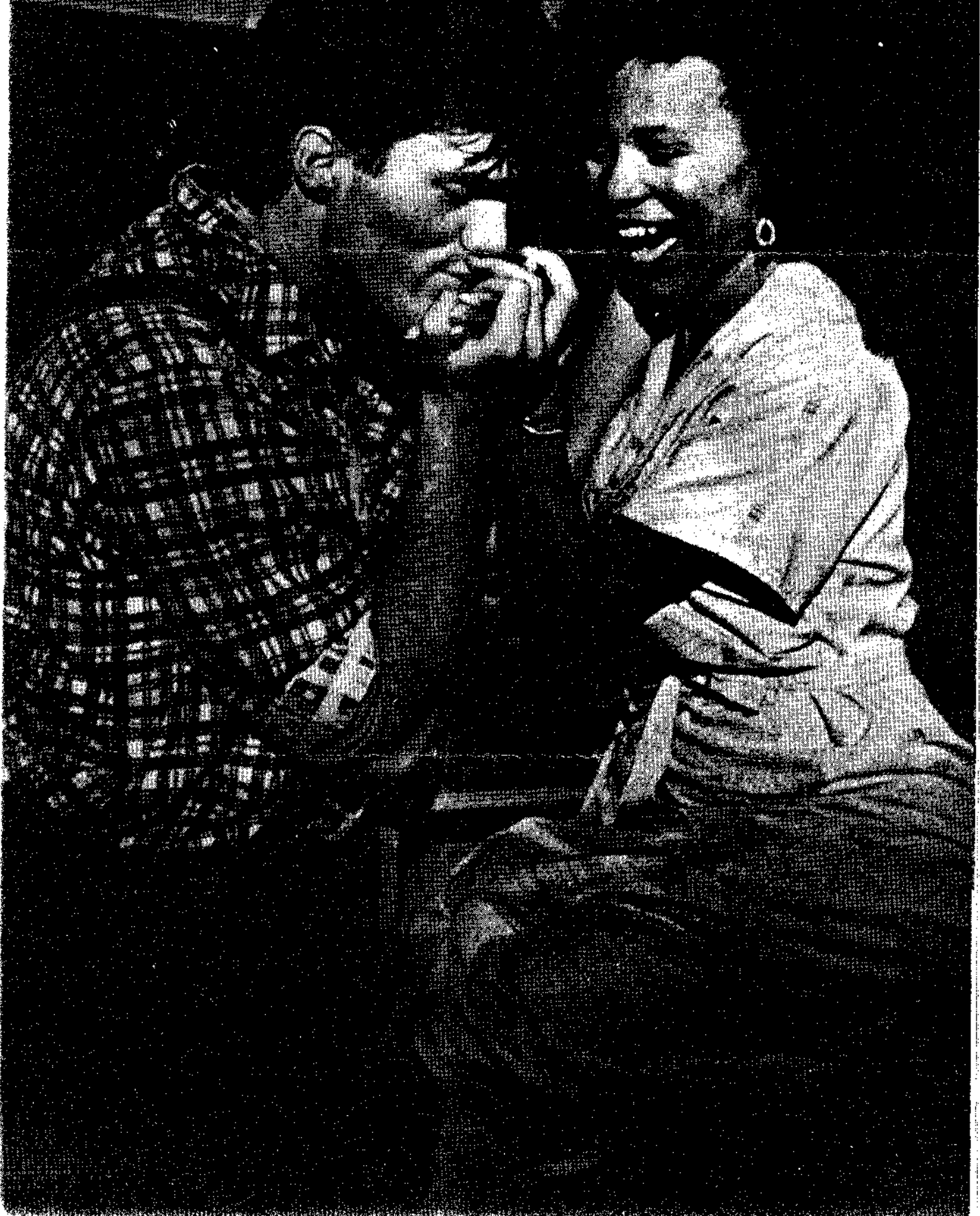
to Nelson. I had just read the novel and suggested turning it into a musical. He was intrigued by the idea. We started working on it but it eventually petered out. He was much more literal—as people were in those days—about having a real set and explaining everything."

Forget the '60s film version of *A Walk on the Wild Side*, which starred Laurence Harvey, Anne Baxter, Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Fonda, and Capucine. The title, the New Orleans whorehouse setting, and a few characters' names are all that survived the transition to the screen.

Algren's work has never been adapted to the stage before, although a few films have been made from his novels. "Nelson wrote *A Walk on the Wild Side* in order to sue Otto Preminger for his film version of *The Man With the Golden Arm*," says Holt. "Nelson had sold the rights to *Man* for \$15,000, thinking they would never be able to make a movie out of his story of drug pushers, etc. Well, Preminger makes this multi-million dollar movie. Nelson didn't like the finished product, so he decided to sue. But he needed money for the lawsuit, so he started writing another novel. He was going up to Cape Cod to finish working on the book. His lawyer told him, 'I know the plane stops in New York. Do not

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Jeb Brown and Talya
Ferro in *A Walk on
the Wild Side*



Hamilton Camp, Richard Ryder,
Taylor Jenkins, Mary Pat Gleason,
James Dybas, Diane Vincent, and
Jeb Brown

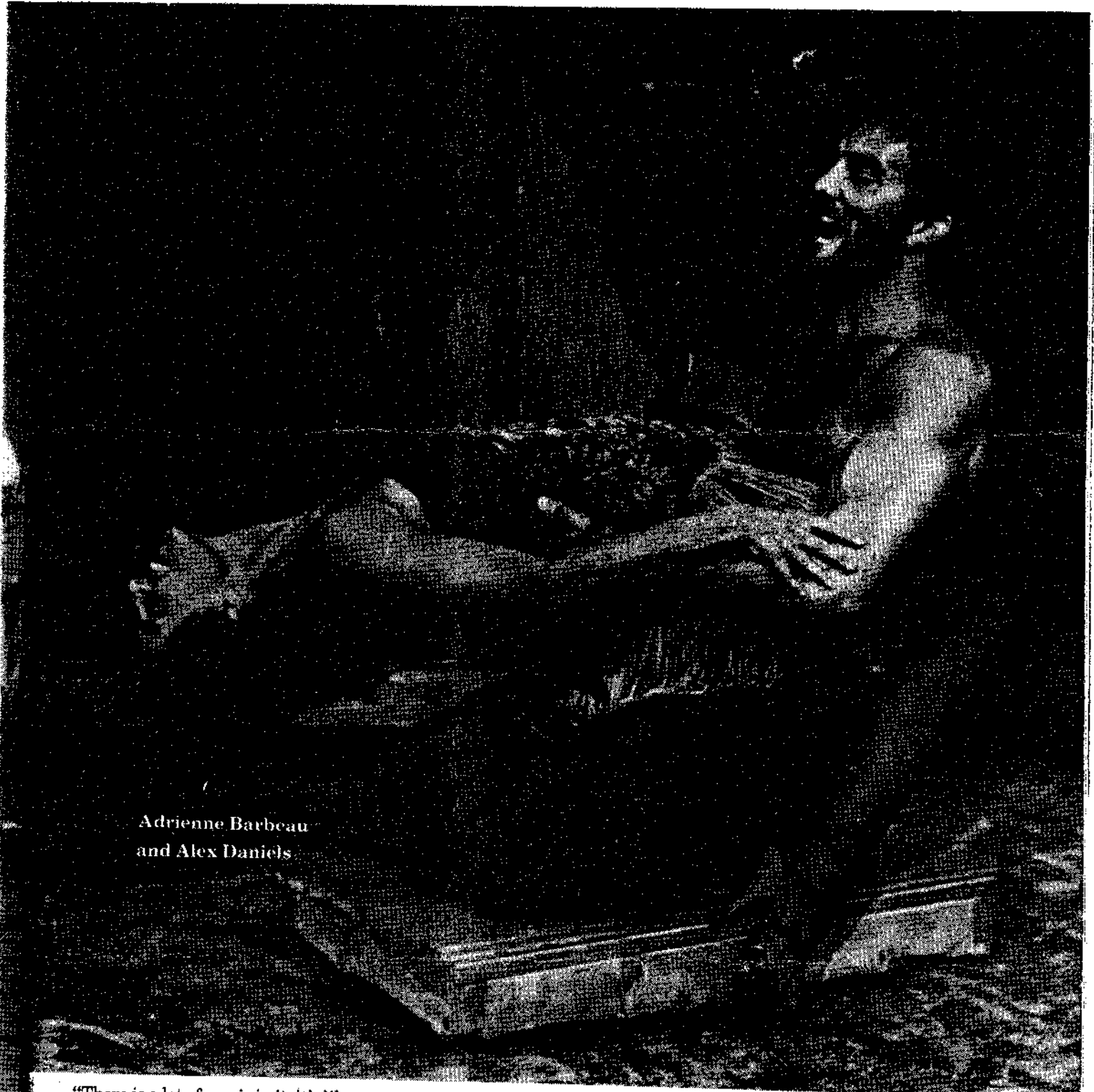


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get off the plane. Do not go into Manhattan. Do not go near 57th Street! The plane landed, Nelson got off, and immediately walked to 57th and Fifth Avenue and met the same agent [who sold the rights to *The Man With the Golden Arm*]. The agent asked, 'How are you? What have you been doing?' Nelson told him he was writing a new novel: 'You have a legless man, an illiterate boy who is blinded; you'll never be able to sell

that to the movies.' So the agent sold the rights for \$20,000. Then Nelson wanted to sue when that resulting film came out. I guess the moral is never go near 57th Street and Fifth Avenue."

What drew Holt to this story of a 17-year-old illiterate Texas youth who becomes a New Orleans whorehouse stud in the depths of the Depression? "It's a story about survival in a very lousy time. I thought it would make a

great country/western musical. Nobody had ever done that kind of combination before, a sort of real acid Brecht-Weill social comment done with a totally American country style. An American *Threepenny Opera*. It's a cross between *Threepenny* and *Huckleberry Finn*. That's exactly what got me into it. I had been performing Kurt Weill's work and was looking for the American equivalent and Nelson seemed to be it.



Adrienne Barbeau
and Alex Daniels

"There is a lot of music in it; it's like a pop opera. When I say it is like *The Threepenny Opera*, what I mean is that Weill took the songs of the times and the sounds of the streets and put an underscoring to them that gave them their own kind of drama. That's exactly the kind of thing I believe I'm doing. The songs sound like songs people would have sung around that time but there is a dramatic underscoring that gives them a harder edge than

most country/western music has. I think it's very accessible musically. I believe there are two styles of musical theater—one is Brecht/Weill and the other is Rodgers/Hammerstein. Mine is closer to Brecht/Weill.

"Dove [the main character] is illiterate. He goes to New Orleans to be 'some kind of great'—he doesn't know what, but if he learns how to read, he might discover it. So in this journey in 1931, when most people were out of

work, he finds that the one thing he is good at, has a talent for, is being a stud in a whorehouse. And at the end of the first act, that is what he becomes. He says, 'Okay, I can't read my name if it were writ on the back of a barn, but I can make more money in a day than you can make in a week.' He's riding the crest but he still feels a little bit unhappy. He begins to drink too much. One of the whores sees him wasting his life. She offers to teach

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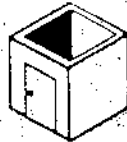
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him to read if he stops drinking. He agrees, but this creates jealousy in one of the barroom regulars and the result is a brutal brawl. And now that Dove can read, he is blinded. He overcomes that too, and goes on with his life and returns to the girl he loves. It's a journey of education. The 'walk on the wild side' teaches him what life is, and life is tough. But you go on."

Holt first met Patricia Birch in 1970 when they both worked on *The Me Nobody Knows*. He mentioned the Algren project to her and she was interested.

Algren died in 1982 and Holt eventually got the rights to the material. Several readings were done before the workshop production in New York.

Birch, co-director with Back Alley's Allan Miller, brings a wealth of musical theater background to the project. Her on and off-Broadway credits include the original choreography for *Grease*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Over Here!*, *Zoot Suit*, *Roza*, *They're Playing Our Song*, and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. *Elvis: A Musical Celebration*, the tribute show which premiered in Las Vegas this summer and is currently touring the country, is her latest directorial achievement. Her film credits include the choreography for *Roseland*, *Zoot Suit*, *Grease* and *Grease II*, which she also directed. For television she was choreographer for *The Electric Company* and has also done work for *Dance in America*. She received a 1988 Emmy nomination for the "Celebrating Gershwin" episode of *Great Performances*.

Birch believes directing is a natural progression from choreographing, "depending on the piece. I'm not really interested in directing a straight play; I really love musicals and things with music in them." She has no favorites among the various media she has worked in. "I love it all. Even music videos. I've done three for Cyndi Lauper and some for other artists."

For *A Walk on the Wild Side* Birch cast twelve performers, with an emphasis on actors who could sing and dance. Jeb Brown recreated the role of Dove he originated in the New York workshop production. Adrienne Barbeau had the role of Hallie, the

cynical whore who teaches Dove to read. James Dybas essayed the role of Finnerty, the New Orleans pimp, and Hamilton Camp played his accomplice. Alex Daniels was Schmidt, the former circus strongman who lost his legs to the Union Pacific.

"They're constantly moving," Birch said. "My staging is very fluid, balletic. It's a bunch of people in Depression times who tell you a story, each becoming a character in the story and telling it from a different point of view. It's really quite simple."

"Pat and I both wanted a show," said Holt, "that was not slotted into different categories: this is singing, this is dancing, this is acting. It all flows together. The actors move while talking, while singing; it all keeps flowing."

Birch: "The basic image of the show is one of boxcars. Don Gruber's set design is very sparse. There are three boxcar-like set pieces that are used for various purposes, then some *'objets trouvés'* of the period to finish off the picture."

Holt: "I'm very conscious of using Nelson's words to do the work of sets because he had such a vivid way of describing certain things. When you have the actors telling you this, in a kind of narrative, it's better than any set could ever be."

What are the pair's plan for the show after the Back Alley run? Holt would like to see it go on to New York, although as of this writing, nothing definite has been set. Birch has other ideas: "This is a piece that evolves; it kind of grows, like *Topsy*. It's a piece that a lot of singing actors can do very well and I think it belongs in the libraries of a lot of rep theaters. I don't see New York, Broadway, as the end-all. There are a lot of plays, good plays, being done all over the country that haven't been done in New York first."

Holt summed up, "I have always wanted to do this work because I think Nelson Algren is one of the three or four really great American novelists of the period, along with Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Wolfe. He has been discarded in a strange way and I think it's time he's brought back. I hope this show will live up to the novel because it's a very powerful piece of work." □

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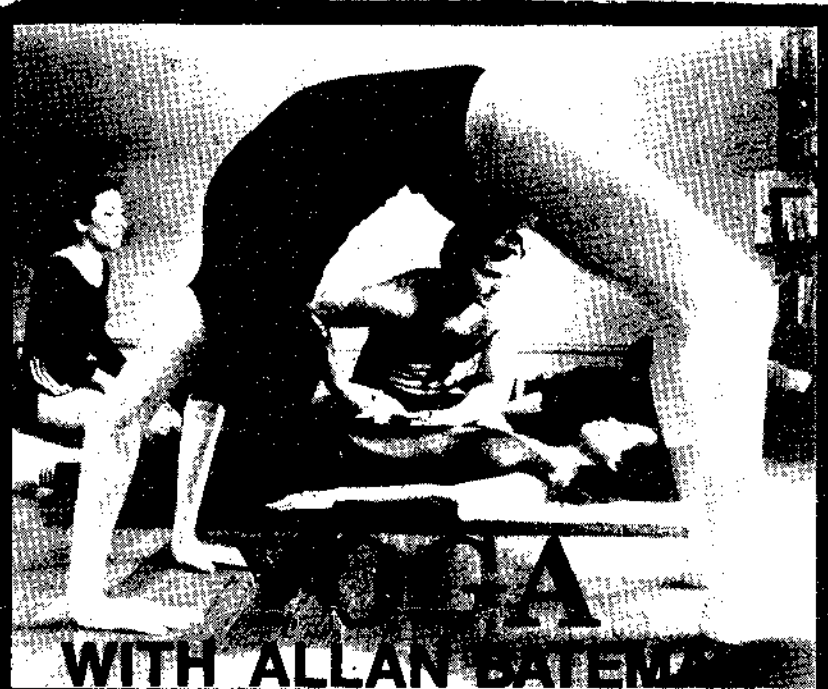
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