

TICKETHOLDERS



By TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

After a long, dry spell, Los Angeles now has the happy

task of welcoming its first big musical hit since "Mail".

Many years ago, playwright/composer Will Holt was introduced to the late author Nelson Algren. He expressed fondness for the writer's famous Depression-era novel, "A Walk on the Wild Side", and mentioned he thought it would make a "terrific musical".

Algren "looked at me very oddly and said, 'A musical with a legless man and a guy who goes blind?'"

Thirty years have since passed, but finally Holt's dream

has been realized. And brilliantly.

Holt's musical version of "A Walk on the Wild Side" opened last Thursday at the Back Alley in Van Nuys and is the most imaginative, innovative musical offering L.A. has been treated to in many a moon.

Anyone who wondered aloud to Holt over the passing years how Algren's dark, unhappy novel (about pimps and whores and the underbelly of society where friends do in friends for a quick greasy buck) could be translated into song, had best head to the Back Alley. "Bells Are Ringing" or "Sound of Music" it ain't. But then, neither is "Porgy and Bess" or "Three-penny Opera", the kind of special musical entertainment closer to comparison with this haunting piece of theatre.

The cast is strong and forceful, working proudly to bring us a performance to



A MUSICAL 'WALK. . .' — Adrienne Barbeau and Alex Daniels star as Hallie and Achilles Schmidt in Will Holt's dynamic new musical version of 'A Walk on the Wild Side' by Nelson Algren.

— Photo by Ed Krieger

remember, especially admirable last Sunday afternoon when the air conditioning in the theatre failed and the actors continued gamely, drenched in sweat.

Still, the one real star of this production is the music, which is, unlike most music of today's theatre, something you'd want to take home on compact disc and remember always. It is, quite simply, ab-

solute perfection; Holt is a talent on par with Sondheim, Gershwin, Bernstein, and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Honest.

I felt we were present at the first breath of a major work, destined for greatness and surely soon to be appreciated on a larger scale. The score charms throughout, dipping and soaring, alternately sliding gracefully to accentuate the poetic lyrics, sending goose-



bumps up the arms.

Holt's amazing score is finely augmented by the inventive staging by recent Emmy winner Patricia Birch (for "Celebrating Gershwin") and Allan Miller. The direction is charged with imagination and immediately transcends the limits of both the small stage and the epic proportions of the novel. Utilizing only a few rough wooden platforms on wheels designed by Don Gruber, the exceptional cast winds from boxcar to brothel with only a quick turn to the left or right.

It is an exciting concept that takes the audience on a ride to the seedy side of the 1930's the second the lights come up.

The cast is stellar, working as an ensemble in the truest sense of the word. Though publicity highlights the presence of Adrienne Barbeau as a drawing card, her work is

just part of a well oiled machine of talent. This is not taking anything away from the actress; to the contrary, the fact that she is here obviously because she believes in the piece rather than looking for a star vehicle is to her credit. Her Hallic, the classic hooker with a heart, is beautifully realized and her duet of "Fancy Nighttime Women" with Alex Daniels (as the legless Achilles Schmidt) is one of the best of the evening.

Daniels is dynamic as the tortured Schmidt, also scoring on "Strong Man's Song".

Jeb Brown is the wandering youth Dove Linkhorn and has a mighty job to accomplish in the demanding role. There are times when he seems a bit too satisfied with going for "gee willikers rather than really discovering the depth of the character, but this is opening weekend: Brown has a lot of time for introspection when the high begins to wear off. He has all the right building blocks for a more finely tuned performance.

Talya Ferro is a standout as the feisty Terasina, though a little too young and innocent-appearing to be referred to as "Senora". Aigren's world-weary Mexican cantina owner was written older and harder, making her submission to Dove more poignant. Still, when Ferro opens her mouth

to sing, especially on the lovely "Shut Out the Night", any miscasting can be quickly forgiven.

Cult favorite folk singer and comedian Hamilton Camp is wonderful as the slimy, grinning Fort, kind of a rural American version of Oliver's Fagin, and his exceptional voice is a tremendous asset to the proceedings. Now if he can master his lines without stumbling . . .

Ex-local actor/pop singer Richard Ryder returns to L.A. after a seventeen year absence as Dove's rail-riding brother Byron and, with Camp, brings the first signs of a most professional evening's entertainment, opening the show heading a knockout number, "Stay Away From Waycross", then icing the cake with "That Old Piano Roll".

The "chorus", if you can call them that, consists of James Dybas, Luise Heath, Taylor Jenkins, Mary Pat Gleason, Lauren Sterling, and Diane Vincent as pimps and whores and lovable country folks of all types. Sterling's

solo as the runaway Kitty, "My Life is Hard", and Gleason's philosophizing hooker Reba are the most noteworthy.

It would be an affront not to also single out the colorful costuming of Bob Miller, the moody lighting design by Lawrence Oberman, and the passionate piano accompaniment by musical director/orchestrator Sam Kriger and Leo Krubsack, which all adds so importantly to the success of Holt's masterful work adapting the classic "Walk . . .".

I have a feeling this show will be one to go on to Broadway and become a mega-hit (perhaps pruned a bit in length), if the right people hear about it. Don't miss it while it's right here in this steaming reclaimed desert of ours for us to enjoy; it's worth spending a couple of hours fanning yourselves with your programs.

"A Walk on the Wild Side" will be playing through November 13th at the Back Alley, 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys. For information, call (818) 780-2240.

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