

After Long Wait In Wings, 'Walk' To Tune Up Sept. 4

By KATHLEEN O'STEEN

Staging a Depression-era musical in the 1980s could be just as its title suggests: "A Walk On The Wild Side."

It took more than 30 years to bring this musical to the stage (due for a world premiere Sept. 4 at the Back Alley), yet the show's composer, Will Holt, sees the piece as a message of hope that still beats on today.

Based on the Nelson Algren novel, the idea of putting the story on stage with music actually started back in 1957 in Chicago. "I was working as a folksinger and Studs Terkel brought Algren down to see me," Holt said.

The duo hit it off and actually worked together on five of the show's songs at that time. Yet circumstances eventually intervened and the two put the project aside. It wasn't until 1982 when Algren died and Holt acquired the rights (in 1985) that he began to toy with the idea of finishing the musical.

The musical got a workshop production in New York, where Patricia Birch (who choreographed "Grease," "Zoot Suit" and Holt's own "The Me Nobody Knows" among others) directed it. She has since followed the project as its director on the west coast.

"I guess we were looking for the next step beyond a workshop pro-

duction," Holt said. "I had seen something at the Back Alley before and then discovered that Allan Miller and Laura Zucker were looking for a new musical."

What has happened since its workshop production has been some re-writing on Holt's part along with a paring down of the music, which will be played on two pianos in this outing.

"The orchestrations will come later," he admitted. "Right now, it will be played with all the honky-tonk and country qualities inherent in the music."

12 Actors

And while the music may be pared down, the 12-member cast (including Adrienne Barbeau) will remain intact, probably one of the last vestiges of the current Waiver theater scheme (prior to the onset of the 99-Seat Theater Plan in October when actors will have to be reimbursed for their time).

"I've been told that putting music to a story that tends to be downbeat will not work," Holt said. "But I don't believe it. Look at 'Porgy And Bess' or 'Les Miserables.' This work took in the depression like no other that I've ever come across.

"The music just makes it exciting," he said. "After all, there's always hope glimmering."