

LEGIT REVIEW

A Walk On The Wild Side

(Back Alley Theater;
93 seats; \$18.50 top)

Underneath the excessive narration, some extraneous songs and a meandering book, there seems to be a good musical in "A Walk On The Wild Side." In its present state, show is interesting, but has the potential to be more than that with some much-needed focusing and tightening.

Writer-composer Will Holt has based his work on Nelson Algren's 1956 novel, in which characters' longings for the American dream are ironically heightened by the desperation of the Depression-era setting.

Illiterate, barefoot farmboy Dove Linkhorn, armed only with platitudes and optimism, is convinced he can be someone important — ignoring the harsh realities of the squalor and poverty surrounding him.

But Dove loses focus of his dream; seduced by empty sex, quick money and insincere praise, he becomes a performer of live sex acts staged in a New Orleans brothel before he is eventually redeemed, finding happiness in an unexpected way.

Holt and codirectors Patricia Birch and Allan Miller — Birch also did the choreography — have created a production of appealing simplicity, with 12 actors, backed by only two pianists, performing on a set consisting simply of drapes and several wooden bunkbed-type units that, when moved, double as everything from boxcars to houses to beds. (Don Gruber is the very talented set designer.)

Holt's score blends touches of ragtime, c&w, honky-tonk and blues into what is basically a Broadway sound. Score needs some tinkering, but much of it is good, with a solid blend of ballads and uptempo numbers, several of which manage

to capture the longings and hopes of the characters and the period.

Choreographer Birch has done an amazing job with these sequences, with movement so fluid that the sets seem to be dancing as well as the actors. Birch creates a remarkable amount of life on the small stage and the dance, appropriately, eloquently points up the drama in the characters and situations.

At this point, most of the problems with "Walk" occur in the nonmusical sections. Much like its protagonist, work seems to have lost focus of its goals, especially in the first act.

Besides telling Dove's tale, musical attempts to create a mosaic of the period, and gets easily sidetracked by characters and events that are tangential to the piece. Holt may be hampering himself by trying to adhere too closely to his source material.

Too many subsidiary characters are given time in the spotlight, but their stories are too often not punchy enough. Rather than bolstering the main theme, this dilutes it, and also shortchanges key characters who need to be more fully developed.

Though generally good, the work of the directors and actors occasionally compounds the problem. With few exceptions, the hunger, ruthlessness and carnality often looks carefully rehearsed rather than genuine. There is too little Depression grit under the actors' fingernails; at this point, it's only makeup to simulate dirt.

As Dove, Jeb Brown overdoes the gee-whillikers yokel routine, especially at the beginning, but as the character grows in strength, so does Brown's performance.

The underrated Adrienne Barbeau is excellent as the complex Hallie, a prostitute who takes a non-sexual interest in Dove. One hopes she'll eventually be given more to

do. Hamilton Camp and Talya Ferro as, respectively, a treacherous low-life and Dove's wounded lover, are also notable.

Also in the cast are Alex Daniels, James Dybas, Mary Pat Gleason, Luise Heath, Taylor Jenkins, Richard Ryder, Lauren Sterling and Diane Vincent.

Lawrence Oberman's lighting and Bob Miller's costumes are a big help. Also making strong contributions are musical director-pianist Sam Kriger, pianist Leo Kurbsack and associate director Greg Rosatti.

Laura Zucker produced show, which is skedded to run through Nov. 13.

Show is 60% there, but the next 40% is crucial. With reworking, "Walk" could go on to a successful run at the Back Alley, and an extended life in budget-minded smaller and regional theaters that are hungry for small-scale musicals.

Gray.