

16 Part VI Friday, March 10, 1989

Stage Reviews

Streetwise Confessions From 'A Bronx Tale'

W e're in the Bronx, in the '60s, watching life in an Italian neighborhood through the eyes of a 9-year-old boy. Signs on a lamppost tell us we're at 187th Street and Belmont Avenue.

That detail is important. It underscores the almost feral sense of place and character in the autobiographical "A Bronx Tale." The production is a raucous, solo tour de force written and performed by Chazz Palminteri, a recent arrival from New York who spills all his Bronx luggage over the stage of the West Coast Ensemble.

Talk about a hot calling card. Palminteri, in mercurial shifts, plays at least a dozen neighborhood miscreants and cultpurses, besides framing the events through the perspective of his adult persona.

The director is Mark W. Travis, who has carved a mini-genre staging one-man confessional, theater-of-therapy pieces, namely "Time Flies When You're Alive" (about the death of a young wife) and "No Place Like Home" (about child abuse).

This time, however, Travis has made a big departure. The material isn't painful, the drama is not inward, and the actor could just as well be making the whole thing up. The success of this show never relies on the fact that Palminteri's adventures really happened to him.

In short, the shock of the personal is submerged into a plot that's bountifully commercial, hitched to the ripest of childhood conflicts: good versus villainy. Here, the youth's love for his upright father is sorely tested by his fascination with a flashy small-time numbers racketeer, whose protégé the boy becomes.

There's innocence, betrayal, murder and, when the boy protagonist becomes a teen-ager, a racially daring romance with a black girl that hurtles events skyward.

Palminteri's verbal and physical virtuosity paint comical images. He's never merely a clever guy with a hilarious Italian Bronx swagger mimicking creeps and bozos from his childhood but a chameleon capturing characters in saloons and on tenement porch stoops (set design by Lee Ranch and Roger Kelton) in an intermissionless show that is shaped like a brisk three-act play.

What we have here is the theatrical genesis of a terrific movie. It comes as no surprise that Travis



Chazz Palminteri plays a dozen characters in "A Bronx Tale."

has staged the production cinematically (with shifting lighting design by Mark Vargas).

Flashes of "Street Scene," "Angels Have Dirty Faces" and even "Next Stop Greenwich Village" swim into focus.

Those who see the show shouldn't miss the candid photo, inauspiciously posted outside the theater, of Kid Palminteri and his buddies, including the racketeer known as Little Johnny, taken on a street in the Bronx in 1968. (The producers should ID it.)

Performances at 6240 Hollywood Blvd., Thursday and Friday, 8 p.m.; Saturday, 7 and 9 p.m.; through April 8. Tickets: \$10-\$12. (213) 466-1767. —RAY LOYND

'Tune the Grand Up' Could Use Fine-Tuning

AN other Jerry Herman revue? "Tune the Grand Up," at the Back Alley Theatre, is the third salute to the popular Broadway lightweight (composer/lyricist of "Hello, Dolly!," "Mame," "La Cage aux Folles") to be seen here recently. Long Beach's Studio Theatre presented the most famous Herman revue, "Jerry's Girls," and a second Herman program made up a recent AIDS benefit.

It all seems somewhat excessive. Herman's oeuvre is hardly inexhaustible; "Tune the Grand Up" repeats many of the songs heard in "Jerry's Girls."

Nor is Herman the ideal composer to focus on for an entire evening, or two or three. His songs are not deep. They don't yield new insights

from repeated performances. They don't need the shows that gave them birth to be understood, but they do need those shows, with their characters and dramatic situations, in order to soar.

"Tune the Grand Up" has a few advantages over "Jerry's Girls." The title and concept aren't as condescending, and the inclusion of men on stage as well as women naturally leads to a wider range of dramatic possibilities.

"Tune" features a half-dozen more songs than the 36 in "Jerry's Girls." Most are truncated—which is no great loss for many of them, but which dilutes the effect of the best songs, such as "If He Walked Into My Life." This adds to the impression of superficiality that's inherent in the material.

Director Rick Roemer has assembled a fascinating cast. Two of the five are conventionally young and slim-trim, but the other three add a welcome note of variety to the usual look of such shows.

The discovery of the show is Sharon Murray. She looks uncomfortable when she first appears in the upbeat opening ensemble numbers. She's a large woman, in a strapless dress that isn't very flattering (Don Nelson did the costumes). But then we hear her voice, and it's a powerful, rich instrument.

She also acts her solos for all they're worth. Her renditions of the fierce "Wherever He Ain't" and the doleful "Time Heals Everything," both from "Mack and Mabel," are the show's highlights.

They're also among the most simply staged numbers. Roemer's and choreographer Carol Woodbury's inventive blocking helps disguise the shallowness of the material, and musical director Nelms McKelvain (at the grand, of course) keeps the show hopping (too much so in a strangely jittery "It Only Takes a Moment"). But the show could use a few more concentrated or unexpected moments, such as the slow and harmonically interesting approach to "Hello, Dolly!" at the beginning.

And it could do without a silent movie parody, featuring the cast on film, that interrupts the performance of "Movies Were Movies" with a labored stab at comedy.

Woodbury performs as well as choreographs, adding her throaty voice and irrepressible vigor. Brad Blaisdell contributes a screwy comic look. The capable Mark McGee and Maureen Mershon have the more conventional voices and looks, but they indulge in some unnecessary mugging.

The set consists of posters from Herman shows (including "Jerry's

Please see STAGE, Page 18

STAGE

Continued from Page 16

Girls") tacked on to the fence erected for "Voice of the Prairie," which shares the space, but Lawrence Oberman's lighting design is considerably more sophisticated.

At 15231 Burbank Blvd., Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 8 p.m., Fridays at 10 p.m., Saturdays at 3 p.m. and 10 p.m., through May 20. Tickets: \$14.50-\$18.50; (818) 780-2240.

—DON SHIRLEY