



JOHN BAUGUESS

Joie de Vivre

VLT's *Paris* revued

Never mind the title; Jacques Brel is neither well nor living in Paris. He died in 1978, but his legacy of music and lyrics has been revived in the Very Little Theatre's 79th season opener, the cabaret-style music revue *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*. A troubadour, a poet and a prolific writer of more than 400 songs, Brel's diverse musical palette has been covered by artists from Nina Simone and David Bowie to Sting and Frank Sinatra. Brel's music gained popularity in the U.S. in the 1960s, and in 1968, songwriter Mort

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Shuman and playwright Eric Blau translated his lyrics into English for the original revue, which became one of the longest running off-Broadway shows in history. For its second run at VLT — Joe Zingo directed the show at VLT in 1980 — *Jacques Brel* returns under the direction of Melina Neal, who performed and co-directed it in 1972 at the UO's Carnival Theatre.

Capturing the *joie de vivre* of Brel's Paris, Melina Neal and David Sherman have transformed the Very Little Theatre stage into a chic bohemian Paris nightclub. Against a backdrop of Sigrid Lambros' hand-painted, post-impressionist Henri de Toulouse Lautrec-inspired mural is a bar and a collection of old-world café tables and chairs swathed in smoky muted tones. A four-piece band (Lydia Lord on piano, percussionist Merlin Showalter, Dusty Whittaker on guitar and Doug Hayden on bass) provides rich musical accompaniment to seven principal and four ensemble performers. Brel's 24 ballads, tangos and boleros tell stories that embrace universal themes on everyday life, loneliness, love, war, society and social commentary, old age and death.

An inspired set, great costumes and a bitchin' band — the program has all the trappings of a fabulous show, yet the performances seemed a bit uneven and at times unin-

spired, although overall the cast excelled in the group choral arrangements. In some instances, the band completely overwhelmed the unmiked singers, particularly the female principals, and some of the songs seemed clunky or extraneous. The lyrics didn't fit or flow, possibly a result of French to English translation. Nancy Hopps has a lovely voice, but not a strong one, and though her solo performances in "My Childhood," "My Death" and "Sons of the Thief" were impressive, it was challenging to hear her if you were seated at the back of the theater. Likewise, although her vocals were diminished as well, Jennifer Burt did a good job with "No Love, You're Not Alone" and "I Loved." The men's vocals were easier to hear, yet Lew Thorn's onstage timing, presence and cadence proved more engaging than his singing ability in his lamentous renditions of "Fanette" and "Alone." Will Vanderbilt, clearly the weakest vocalist, performed best in the humorous numbers that required more onstage acting ability including "Next," in which he plays a cynical soldier, and "Funeral Tango," in which Vanderbilt is cast as a corpse witnessing the unsavory behavior of his relatives and friends at his own funeral. Although Chad Bush provided the strongest vocals among the men, diction problems mired his solo performances of "Jackie," "Amsterdam" and "Bachelor's Dance."

Still, there were a couple of really outstanding performances: Elizabeth Siegel's poignant and seasoned presentation of "Old Folks" was a tremendous hit. The eldest member of the cast, Siegel began her career in the 1940s when she appeared with Arthur Godfrey on TV and radio. And perhaps the most underutilized talent in this production is Melissa Walther. She delighted audience members with her strong, crystal-clear vocal performance of the haunting "Marieke," the only French language piece in the show. Similarly, Walther was electrifying as she led the cast for "Carousel," the most riveting performance of the evening, entrancing the audience in a stunning display of whirling sight and sound.

If the packed house and positive chatter overheard during the after show gala were any indication, the show was a huge success, and perhaps any sound problems and opening night jitters will have disappeared after a few more performances.

The revue continues Oct. 19-21 and 25-28 and Nov. 1-4 and 8-10.

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