

arts cont.

Jacques Brel is alive and well . . . at MIT

By Kathy Hardis

The MIT Musical Theatre Guild's current production of *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* incorporates vocal and instrumental talent in a cabaret-style atmosphere, and the resulting performances are enjoyable and well worth hearing.

The show is neither a review nor a musical but rather a presentation of twenty-six songs written by the Belgian-born composer Jacques Brel. These songs go beyond the typical French cabaret *chansons*, and even in their English translations the lyrics are poetic and emotionally powerful.

Jacques Brel has no plot, but each song is almost a self-contained minidrama with its own individual mood and characters. In one scene the statue of a soldier recounts the hypocrisy of his death and his undeserved hero's memorial, while in another a boy waits in rain outside a movie house for a girl who does not want to see him.

The subjects of these songs encompass a variety of topics — old age, love, death, loneliness, class distinction — and the musical styles range from catchy vaudeville numbers to harsh, assertive songs of protest.

The virtuoso quartet of singer/performers consists of Sharon Lowenheim '79, Susan Morgello '78, Tom Tomasovic '74, and director Robert Greer G. Their voices blend together well, especially in the lively "Madeleine," but each individual possesses a distinct manner of singing.

The quality and style of Sharon Lowenheim's voice is rich, clear, and well-controlled; hers is perhaps the most pleasant in the production. Her rendition of "Old Folks" is touching and expertly done.

Susan Morgello invokes the moods and meanings of her songs not only with her voice but also with her facial expressions and body movements. Her performance of "Marieke" is sung well and comes across



John Lepingwell (courtesy Technique)

with great emotional impact.

Tom Tomasovic has the group's most powerful and trained voice and sings with the proper, upright style of opera. His formality fades when he sits on a stool and sings the evening's most beautiful and stirring song, the poignant love ballad "Fanette."

Robert Greer throws himself into his songs with feeling and emotion, especially in "Next" and "Amsterdam."

The small jazz orchestra, conducted by Eric Ziering '78, is as praiseworthy as the cast. Only on a few occasions do they play too loudly, but generally their performance and additional jam sessions are outstanding.

The technical aspects of this production are understandably limited because *Jacques Brel* does not warrant excessive theatrical effects. The lighting, however,

occasionally uses special effects to enhance the moods of the songs. Colored lights move around the stage during "Carousel," increasing in speed with the music, and a strobe adds the appropriate atmosphere to "Brussels," a lively piece reminiscent of the song-and-dance numbers in old-time movies.

The use of a platform stage as opposed to a standard proscenium theatre works well in the production. In spite of the stage's unusual shape, the performers are usually positioned effectively, and their simple choreography does not override their singing. Some of the group numbers, such as "Marathon," could have been coordinated more precisely, but the staging of "Timid Frieda" and "The Bulls" are both clever and well executed.

The "cabaret atmosphere" is created by small tables which casually surround the

low platform stage. Waiters bring complimentary popcorn to each table and sell drinks at moderate prices.

There are many reasons for the success of *Jacques Brel*, and the only serious failure lies in its unfortunate location. The large, acoustically poor Lobdell dining hall, inherently built to deaden sound, lacks the cozy intimacy necessary for such a production. One hopes that by the second weekend microphones and speakers will be added, so that the audience sitting far away from the stage hear the words clearly and distinctly.

If one does sit close enough to the stage, it is possible to receive the production's full theatrical impact. *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* is a stirring and wonderful show, performed by a cast capable of doing justice to the Brel's brilliant music.

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