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Reviews of Kurt Weill's folk ballad opera *Down in the Valley* and Douglas Moore's folk ballad opera *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, Skylight Theater, Milwaukee

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by Curtis L. Carter

Simplicity and a certain folk-elegance are marks of the Skylight Theater's current productions of two American folk ballad operas: **Down in the Valley** by Kurt Weill and **The Devil and Daniel Webster** by Douglas Moore. The performances provide a nice relaxing evening of light melodrama coupled with some very fine music.

Down in the Valley is the tragic love story of Brach Weaver and Jenny Parsons, in a nineteenth century southern rural setting. The tragedy is that Brach is condemned to die for the accidental killing of villain Thomas Bouche in a Saturday night fight at the local dance hall. He escapes to spend his last hours with Jenny. The story moves swiftly and cleanly with songs and music that are romantic without being sentimental.

The Devil and Daniel Webster, an adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benet's story of Jabez Stone who sold his soul to the devil for success. When the devil arrives at a wedding feast to collect, Daniel Webster intervenes to save Stone, Summoning a jury of villains from the

depths of hell, the devil, Mr. Scratch, and Webster argue their case. In the end Webster's eloquent oratory persuades the villains to return a verdict in favor of Stone, thus demonstrating with folk ballad exaggeration the powers of Webster.

Although Moore's music is compelling, the story in "Daniel Webster" lacks the simple charm of "Down in the Valley." Its camp appeal is encumbered by a cornier, more complicated plot and patriotic fervor that is a bit much, even in its setting.

Skylight singers performed with ease and competence these items of American ballad folklore. The director Clair Richardson chose works well suited to the facilities of his cast and to the stage area. Singers were ably supported by the accompaniment of musical director Jon Olson.

The production which runs through February 6, at the Skylight Theater, 813 N. Jefferson, Milwaukee, will have special interest for those who enjoy folk balladry.
