



THE OPENING NUMBER of *Steel* — Lawrence Bain (Maurice Brash) at extreme left, Arkenian (Nigel Scott) at extreme right with Joyce (Dianne Williams) in red almost off camera.

# Superb 'Steel'

By ANNE HILTON

**"SUPERB" is the only way to describe the star of the show, Jackie Hinkson's painting of the set for *Steel*; one doubts that Broadway or a West End set designer could produce a set that defines the beginnings of steel pan on "The Hill" as well as that seen on the Queen's Hall stage on September 13.**

However, the audience have little time to appreciate the set as the cast dance and sing the opening number. *Steel* is billed as

a musical therefore the music, pan music and panmen must take centre stage.

*Steel* begins with Growler (Albert LaVeau) singing "Were you there when peace was declared?" — recalling the first time pan sides came out to parade through the streets of Port-of-Spain, much to the disgust of the ruling and the respectable middle classes.

The story of "Steel" is well-known. We see Eli Mannette (Leon Morenzie) experimenting, constantly striving to improve the tone and expand the range of the new musical instrument. We see veteran calypsonian Growler, as he was in life, sinking into maudlin self-pity as Johnny Walker Red robs him of his talent.

These are the two real-life characters, the rest (from what one has been able to glean from those with a better grasp of the history of pan) are a mixture, a blend, so that Eli Mannette plays with Bandidos (thinly disguised as Despers) on the Hill. Winston Marshall (Conrad Parris) may, or may not, be a combination of Spree Simon and Bertie Marshall and "Reds" (Brian Green) represents the violence of early steel band clashes when he deserts Bandidos for the Woodbrook Raiders (Invaders).

The love story of Winston and Zara (Marsha Woodley) follows the fortunes of those who leave the Hill spreading the message of pan to seek fame in The Big Apple, and the disillusionment of "Reds" who joins the Marines and dies in a rice field on Pork Chop Hill, Korea, surrounded by North Koreans who bear a distinct resemblance to the Viet Cong.

Winston's adoptive parents, tailor Uncle Daniel (Noel Blandin) and washerwoman Aunt Jessica (Mavis John), are heartbroken when Winston insists on learning pan rather than "bettering himself" as a classical musician, but are reconciled to him, and to pan, when, as an accomplished composer for pan, he returns to his roots on the Hill — and to Zara. Growler is persuaded to give up the bottle and the finale sees him on top of his form again, with Aunt Jessica in costume playing sailor mas — and pan triumphant.

So much for the story. Leon Morenzie did not disappoint as Eli Mannette and veteran actor Albert LaVeau thoroughly enjoyed himself as Growler, complete with a toper's belly. Conrad Parris gave an excellent account of himself as Winston, Brian Green was convincing as the rebellious, violent Reds, while Kurtis Gross had the stature and stage presence one expects of the Captain of Bandidos.

Dianne Williams and Marsha Woodley tended to be overshadowed by the men but gave a good account of themselves playing, respectively Joyce, mistress of the Armenian businessman, Arkenian, and her daughter Zara, Winston's sweetheart. Playing the upper-crust Englishman and wily Armenian Maurice Brash and Nigel Scott had little to do but repeat their performances of these stock characters of Caribbean drama.

Mavis John dominated whenever she appeared,

Noel Blandin made an excellent foil for her character. Rounding out the cast list, minor characters Arnold Goindhan and Kearn Samuel completed the showcase of good local talent.

The chorus and the dancers were a delight, putting heart and soul into their performances. With the exception of a policeman in long pants arresting panmen involved in a steelband clash (surely, in those days police were still wearing shorts and knee-length socks?) the costumes suited the period (we particularly liked Growler's purple calypso tent outfit, sequins and all) — and the sprinkling of traditional Carnival characters.

The lighting was impressive, especially the twinkling lights showing through the backcloth of The Hill at night. Changes of scene consisting of minimal outlines of tailor's shop, beauty salon, rum shop etc flown from the flies above were, on the whole, slick for a first night when, no matter how careful the preparations, things can often go disastrously amiss.

Galt MacDermot's music had some of the audience humming, tapping and singing along, however, from time to time the sound gave problems. Since the staging made it impossible to use the Queen's Hall acoustic "shell," the performers had to be "miked" so that, seen in profile, most of the actors — male and female — seemed to be sporting a small beard.

Unfortunately the strident delivery favoured by such as Whitney Houston distorted the words of many of the singers so that too often it was difficult to distinguish much of Derek Walcott's lyrics. Was that a fault of the mikes, of technical difficulties — as happened when Dianne Williams' mike started giving feedback, until a stagehand with

admirable presence of mind, handed her a conventional mike? On balance, *Steel* is as complete a professional production as has ever been seen on the Queen's Hall stage. If there's still time when you read this, treat yourself to a ticket for a performance you'll not soon forget — not forgetting the set by Jackie Hinkson.