

Satchmo's Shadow: An Excerpt from *Satchmo at the Waldorf*

Terry Teachout

TERRY TEACHOUT, drama critic for *The Wall Street Journal*, is the author of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* (2011), which premiered in Orlando, Fla., and was produced in 2012 at Shakespeare & Company of Lenox, Mass., Long Wharf Theatre of New Haven, Conn., and Philadelphia's Wilma Theater. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship to support the completion of his latest book, *Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington* (2013). His other books include *All in the Dances: A Brief Life of George Balanchine* (2004), *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (2009), and *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (2002). He has also written the libretti for three operas by Paul Moravec: *The Letter* (2009), *Danse Russe* (2011), and *The King's Man* (2013).

Author's Note: Writing the biography of a performing artist is like standing in the wings to watch a play. You see what the public sees, only from a different perspective. *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, my 2009 biography of the greatest jazz musician of the twentieth century, is about the much-loved genius-entertainer who made millions of people feel warm inside – but it's also about the private Armstrong, who swore like a trooper and knew how to hold a grudge. The fact that Satchmo (as he liked to call himself) had two sides to his personality doesn't mean that the public man was somehow less "real" than the private one. Like all geniuses, Armstrong was complicated, and that complexity was part of what made his music so beautiful and profound.

Biography is about telling, theater about showing. Having written a book that told the story of Armstrong's life, it occurred to me that it might be a worthwhile challenge to try to show an audience what he was like offstage. This was the seed from which *Satchmo at the Waldorf* grew. What turned it into a full-fledged play was the idea of having the same actor double as Armstrong and Joe Glaser, Armstrong's mob-connected white manager. (At a later stage in the writing of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, I decided to have the actor play a third "character," Miles Davis, who appears in two short scenes.) You can't have a play without conflict, and the trick to making a one-man play dramatic is finding a way to make that conflict palpable, even visible. When I wrote Glaser into *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, it was as

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though Armstrong’s shadow had suddenly appeared on stage, dark and threatening. All at once I had my villain, the Iago to Satchmo’s Othello – though, like all the best villains, Glaser isn’t nearly as simple, or evil, as he looks.

Satchmo at the Waldorf takes place in March 1971 in a dressing room backstage at the Empire Room of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, where Armstrong performed in public for the last time, four months before his death. Much of what he and Glaser say in the play derives from things that they said in real life, and the way in which both men talk onstage is an accurate portrayal of their habits of speech, right down to the last four-letter word. But the play is still a work of fiction, albeit one that is freely based on fact. It’s an attempt to suggest the nature of their personal relationship, which was so fraught with tension that no mere biographer, obliged as he is to stick to the factual record, could hope to do more than hint at its endless subtleties. Fictionalizing that relationship has freed me to speculate about things that I cannot know for sure but have good reason to suspect. Gordon Edelstein, the director of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, told me that he believed the play to be about “love – and betrayal.” As soon as he said that, I knew that he understood what I was trying to do.

This is my first play, and unlikely as it may sound, I never gave any serious thought to trying my hand at playwriting until I sat down to write the first draft of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* early in 2010. I am, after all, a drama critic by trade, and though a fair number of critics have written plays, it doesn’t happen very often. We inhabit the world of theory, and rarely if ever do we have occasion to dirty our hands with the theater’s ruthless practicalities. Now that I’ve done so, I think that I’ve learned to appreciate them more fully than ever before. Kenneth

Tynan, the British drama critic, was kidding on the square when he said that a critic is “a man who knows the way but can’t drive the car.” The first draft of *Satchmo at the Waldorf* was a carefully drawn road map. The final version is – I hope – a journey.

GLASER You know the *schvartzes*, they’re all lazy or nuts, and at first I thought maybe Louie was just another one of them lazy *schvartzes*. Cause right off he says he wants to leave all the business to me. The idea is, I pick the guys in the band, get the jobs, book the travel. I pay all his bills off the top of the take, then we split what’s left right down the middle, fifty-fifty. In other words, *Joe Glaser* does all the work! I might as well have been doing his fucking laundry! Know what he told me? “I don’t care about being rich, Mr. Glaser. You be rich. I just wanna play my horn.” (*Incredulously*) Jee-zus Christ. What kinda guy don’t wanna be rich?

But I gotta say, I was wrong about Louie. He wasn’t lazy – he was smart. You think about it. He’s out on the road every day with the musicians, those fucking prima donnas. You think he wants to piss ’em off? Hell, no! So I hire the guys, I decide what to pay ’em, and that means when somebody wants more money, Louie can say, “Hey, Pops, ain’t got nothing to do with the dough, you go talk to the boss.” Smart. And once we really got going, I worked him like a dog. Kept him on the road three hundred nights a year. And did he complain? Not once.

Course it was always first class with the All Stars. Top clubs, top cash. Work ’em like dogs, treat ’em like kings, that’s the way to run a band. And Louie trusted me, right down the line. Cause he knew what

he was good at, and I knew what I was good at – and *he* knew what I was good at.

The lights change.

ARMSTRONG You a colored man, you always gonna wonder 'bout white folk. May think they like you, think you in tight with 'em, but then you look up and all of a sudden, they someplace you can't go.

Now *some* white folks, you know they cool soon as you meet 'em. But the majority of white people? Two-thirds of 'em don't like niggers, but they all got one they just crazy about. (*Rolling his eyes and grinning maliciously*) Every white man in the world got one nigger they just love his dirty drawers. Fuck all the rest of us. You think I don't know that? Shit. What you think my life been like? I done played in ninety-nine million hotels I couldn't sleep at – and that was up north! Down south wasn't *no* hotels for colored. Find a boarding house or sleep on the bus, piss in the bushes. No place to eat, neither. Use to stock up in the grocery stores, come out with a loaf of bread, can of sardines, big hunks of baloney and cheese, then we'd eat it in the bus.

Sometimes we go round to the back door of them white restaurants got colored cooks. Knock on the door and say, "Howdy, fellas, what you got for old Satchmo tonight?" And they'd say, "Well, hello, there, Satch! Come on in, take a load off." They always give you what you want long as the boss ain't looking. Ate me a lotta fine T-bones off of them big wooden chopping blocks, standing right there in the kitchen. (*Ironically*) Satchmo the Great, standing in the kitchen.

(*Shrugging it off*) Course you know it ain't always like that. White people, they ain't naturally meaner than colored – they just been on top too long. And *good* white folk did everything decent for me. Play in my

band, buy my records, come to my shows. Kept coming when the colored started listening to rhythm and blues and that bebop shit, didn't care about old Satch no more. No, white folks never did stop coming to see me. (*Gesturing to the audience with visible amusement*) And it don't look like they gonna. They looove my music.

Here, now, looka this.

He reaches into his shirt and pulls out a Star of David hanging on a pendant around his neck.

Star of David. Jewish star. Mr. Glaser, he done give it to me. (*As if revealing a secret*) He Jewish, you know. I wear it every day cause the Jews, they been so good to me. Maybe that's why I trusted Mr. Glaser – he was a Jew, and the Jews never let me down.

Down in New Orleans there was this Jewish family, the Karnofskys. They was junk peddlers done come over from Russia. I worked for them when I was seven years old. Did odd jobs. And they didn't treat me like no butler or nothing. Pat me on my head, tell me I'm a good boy, treat me warm and kind. Like family. Use to sit at they table like I was one of they own. Eat that good Jewish food, teach me them pretty Jewish songs. We'd bring the junk wagon in and they'd say, "Little Louis, you worked hard today, gonna be too late for you to get your supper when you get home, so you just sit right down here and eat with us."

A pause.

They even loaned me the money to buy my first horn. Beat-up little cornet down at the pawn shop. Thought it was the prettiest thing I ever saw.

The lights change.

GLASER You know my father was a doctor? He wanted me to be a doctor, too. "My son, the doctor." Did the *bar mitzvah*, got the fountain pen. Even took violin

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lessons! Only I couldn't hack the straight life. Too slow. So I said fuck it. I started selling used cars, managed a couple of boxers, met a guy who knew a guy, and next thing you know, I'm running the Sunset Club for Al Capone. A nice Jewish boy, working for the wops. But I always liked Al. When he said it, you could take it to the bank. And I liked the whole setup. I mean, shit, who wants to be a doctor? What I like is to push a button and things happen – right now. I like making deals. And I love to see the other guy blink. That's why I come on so hard. You know. (*Barks*) "Fuck you, you little cocksucker!" (*As before, casually*) That kind of thing. Cause people don't expect to hear you talking like that in an office on Park Avenue. Makes 'em sit up and take notice.

You know the way we do business? With a pistol stuck up the other guy's nose. The Chicago way. But the best way is when the other guy *thinks* you gotta pistol, and that you really *would* stick it up his nose if he gave you any shit. And once you work for Al Capone, for the rest of your life that's what people think. "Hey, I fuck with this guy, I could get my legs broken." Even now. Every time I yell at 'em, they piss blood.

A pause.

And then . . . they do what I want.

The lights change.

ARMSTRONG Good white, bad white. Good colored, bad colored. Down in New Orleans, them light-skin colored, them Creoles, they think they hot shit, look down on the rest of us like we was dirt. Jelly Roll Morton, he like that. Had that diamond in his front tooth. Used to swan around saying, "Don't call me colored – I'm one hundred percent French." But you know what? He *still* had to eat out back in the kitchen, just like me.

That why I call myself "Louis," not "Louie." Mr. Glaser, he call me "Louie." White folks all call me "Louie." The announcer here, he call me "Louie" every night before the show. That's O.K., call me what you want, but I ain't no goddamn Frenchman, ain't no Creole, ain't no "Louie." I'm *black*. Black as a spade flush. Woke up black this morning, black when I go to bed, still gonna be black when I get up tomorrow. Don't like it, you can kiss my black ass.

A pause.

But you know what? I don't think folks wanna hear all that angry shit when they lay down that good money to come hear me play. They ain't paying for me to make 'em feel bad. I'm just an old ham actor – blow a tune, tell a joke. I'm there in the cause of happiness. Like when I play the blues, maybe I'm thinking about one of them low-down moments, like when your woman don't treat you right. Hell of a thing when a woman tell you, "I got me another mule in my stall." But when I sing about it, I smile. Make *you* smile.

Mr. Glaser, he done taught me that. Got right in my face and said, "Gotta tone down the jazz, Louie." Told me to smile real big and swing that music lightly and politely.

The lights change.

GLASER I knew how to *present* Louie. Those other dumb-putz managers he had? None of 'em had a clue. When I came along, he was still doing all the crazy jigaboo stuff. Smoke that dope, get out on stage, sing that mush-mouth jungle-bunny mumbo-jumbo, play a thousand high Cs in a row. Fine for the jazz fans, but how many jazz fans are there? You gotta play to the crowd. Let the people know you ain't some goddamn spook with a razor in your pocket.

So Louie comes to me and says, “Help me, Mr. Glaser. Tell me what to do.” (*Speaking directly to the dressing-room chair as though Armstrong were sitting in it*) And I sit him down and I say, “Look, Louie, you wanna work for me, here’s the deal. Forget the critics, forget the musicians. Stop blowing your brains out playing all them goddamn high Cs. Ain’t no money in it. That voice of yours – *that’s* where the money is. Play your cards right, do what I say, one day you won’t even have to play the trumpet. You can just stand up there and sing. You’re an *entertainer*. Just like Al Jolson or Sophie Tucker. So start playing for the public. Sing so people can understand the words. Wave that handkerchief and smile like you don’t gotta care in the world. Do that, you’re gonna make ten times as much money.”

Didn’t give me any backtalk. Not about that, not about nothing. No, he said, “That’s what I’m gonna do, Mr. Glaser,” and he went right out and did it . . . and now look at him. Man’s a goddamn money machine. And you think anybody bought “Hello, Dolly!” to hear him play the fucking trumpet? *Nobody gives a shit!* They don’t care about jazz – it’s *Louie* they love.