



# SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF

BY TERRY TEACHOUT



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Written by Joseph Oliver, Clarence Williams

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*For Mrs. T, Michelle, and Lizzy,  
the truest believers*

The world premiere of SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF was presented by Shakespeare & Company (Tony Simotes, Artistic Director; Nicholas J. Puma, Jr., Managing Director) in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Long Wharf Theatre (Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Joshua Borenstein, Managing Director) in New Haven, Connecticut.

SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF premiered Off-Broadway at the Westside Theater Upstairs, New York, NY, on March 4, 2014. It was produced by Long Wharf Theatre and Shakespeare & Company; and Scott & Roxanne Bok, Roz & Jerry Meyer, Karen Pritzker, Ronald Guttman, Shadowcatcher Entertainment, John LaMattina, Joey Parnes, S.D. Wagner, and John Johnson. It was directed by Gordon Edelstein; the set design was by Lee Savage; the costume design was by Iona Somogyi; the lighting design was by Kevin Adams; the sound design was by John Gromada; and the production stage manager was Linda Marvel. It starred John Douglas Thompson.

SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF was written at the Winter Park Institute of Rollins College in 2010 and extensively revised at the MacDowell Colony in 2012. A workshop performance of the first version of the play was presented by Rollins College in 2011, directed by the author and starring Dennis Neal. The first full production of this version was presented at Orlando Shakespeare Theatre in 2011, directed by Rus Blackwell and starring Dennis Neal.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Satchmo at the Waldorf* takes place in March of 1971, in a dressing room backstage at the Empire Room of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, where Louis Armstrong performed in public for the last time, four months before his death.

The roles of Armstrong, Joe Glaser, and Miles Davis are played by the same actor.

He need not resemble any of these men physically and should suggest Armstrong's voice rather than imitate it.

## A NOTE ON SOUND DESIGN

Louis Armstrong's 1928 recording of "West End Blues" and Bing Crosby's 1960 recording of "Lazy River" should be used as indicated in the script in all performances of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*. The performance rights for these recordings are included in the license agreement for the play, assuming full payment of all associated royalty fees.

Other recorded music by Armstrong and Miles Davis and/or appropriate original music may be used at the director's discretion to accompany the play. Permission to produce *Satchmo at the Waldorf* does not include permission to use such recordings. The producers of the play are solely responsible for licensing their use.

Except as indicated, all music cues should sound somewhat hazy and distant, as if Armstrong is hearing them in his imagination.

This is a work of fiction, based freely on fact.

# SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF

*Over swelling applause, a jazz combo is heard offstage.\* The last set of the evening is over.*

OFFSTAGE ANNOUNCER. *(Over the music and applause.)* Ladies and gentlemen ... that was Louie Armstrong and his All Stars! *Louie Armstrong!*

*Lights up on a dressing room as the music and applause fade down and out. The room contains a cluttered dressing table, a sink, two or three chairs, a coat rack, a small couch, a coffee table, an oxygen tank and mask, and a portable rack that holds two old-fashioned reel-to-reel tape decks, one stacked atop the other, and several tape boxes. A bottle of Pepto-Bismol is on the dressing table. Beneath the table are an old pair of house slippers and a trumpet case. A telephone and two cardboard folders are on the coffee table. The oxygen tank is next to the couch.*

*Louis Armstrong enters, coughing and mopping sweat from his face with a handkerchief. His skin has a grayish, sickly cast. He is wearing a tuxedo and carrying a trumpet. The collar of his dress shirt fits loosely around his neck, suggesting that he has lost a good deal of weight. He crosses to the couch, puts down his trumpet, sits down heavily, grabs the oxygen mask, opens the valve of the tank, and holds the mask to his face. After taking a few deep breaths, he puts down the mask and shuts the valve.*

LOUIS ARMSTRONG. *(Half to himself, wearily.)* I shit myself tonight. *(Directly to the audience.)* Ain't kidding you folks none.

\* In the New York production, a record of "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," Louis Armstrong's theme song, was played here. (Except as indicated, Armstrong's singing voice should not be heard in any of the music that is played before or during the show.)

Did it right back there in the elevator. Lucille and me, we was coming down from the room 'fore the show, all dressed up and ready to go, and then she wrinkle up her nose. "Louis, you feel OK? \*You sure you all right?" I say, "Damn, woman, I done shit my pants!" Had to go back upstairs and change my drawers. Y'all believe that? Seventy years old and here I am, messing myself at the Waldorf. Just like a baby.

Doc told me not to play this gig. He say, "Satchmo, you a sick man. Heart gone bad, kidneys shutting down, might drop dead out there on the bandstand front of God and everybody. Too much done gone wrong with you." I say, "Listen, Doc, when you dead, *everything* wrong with you!"

*During the next speech, he crosses to the coat rack, takes off his tie and jacket, and hangs them up. His movements are slow and effortful.*

See the write-up in the paper today? Man say I'm a "walking Smithsonian Institution of jazz." Well, I'm walking — barely. (*Gesturing toward the oxygen tank.*) Gotta sniff on that thing soon as I close the door so the folks out there can't see. Feel like I done spent twenty thousand years on them planes and trains. Get you there just in time for the gig, no supper, no nothing. Not even no time to light up a joint. Ain't gonna run around like that no more. Don't have to no more. Play right here in the hotel, sleep in that nice big suite upstairs ... and shit myself.

How'd I get so old? Mo-ther-fucker.

*A pause. From here on, Armstrong accumulates strength and intermittently shakes off his exhaustion, energized by the pleasure he takes in the act of reminiscence.*

Guess you never heard me say "motherfucker" before, did you? \*\* Don't talk like that on the TV. (*He grins.*) Can't you just see me going on TV to play "Hello, Dolly!" for the folks? Slap old Ed Sullivan on the back and say, "Hey, Ed, wasn't that a motherfucker?" But we ain't on the TV — we just here in my dressing room, hanging out.

*A pause.*

'Scuse me.

*He crosses to the tape decks and plugs a microphone into the bottom deck.*

\* Except as indicated, Armstrong (unlike the announcer) always pronounces his first name "Lew-is."

\*\* Armstrong always pronounces "-er" (when followed by a consonant) as "-oi," in the New Orleans manner. Thus "heard" is pronounced "hoid," "first" "foist," etc.

How 'bout this here gadget? Ain't it cool? Bought me my first one back in nineteen-hundred and forty-seven. Papa Bing Crosby, he done told me 'bout it, and I says to myself, "I can use this thing." Tape all my shows, listen to 'em afterward, polish up the rough spots and make it sound better next time. And now ... I'm gonna use this one to write me a new book.

*He turns on the deck.*

Talk in here, let some cute little old gal type it up for me. Gonna set the folks straight and tell it all now — while I still can.

*He picks up the microphone and speaks into it.*

Gonna tell 'bout how I took the train up from New Orleans to Chicago in nineteen twenty-two to play with Papa Joe Oliver and the Creole Jazz Band. \* My first big break.

*He puts the microphone on a stand. The bottom deck continues to run throughout the play.*

You know Joe Glaser? Use to be my manager? He died a couple years back. Well, Mr. Glaser didn't like it when I talked about the olden days. All them fancy whores, that good grass, gangsters with the tommy guns. He say it "bad for my image." That's a goddamn laugh. Ain't like I grew up in no convent. I come from Storyville, where all the whores live. Mayann, my mama? *She* was a whore. Everybody in the world know that, and it don't seem to stop 'em from coming to see me.

Besides, I dunno why I should give a shit what Mr. Glaser think no more. He dead. And you know what else? He turned out to be a son of a bitch. Say he my friend and then he hung me out to dry. Trust him my whole damn life and then he pick my pocket. And now he dead and gone, and here I am in nineteen hundred and seventy-one at the Waldorf-Astoria. So fuck Joe Glaser. I'm gonna say what I want. It's my life, ain't it? And man, I use to *live* it. Had me four wives. (*Counting on his fingers.*) A whore, a piano player, and two chorus girls. Count 'em — four. Finally got it right that last time with Lucille. (*Kissing a finger.*) Pretty gal, used to dance up in Harlem at the Cotton Club. First dark-skinned lady they ever hire for the chorus line up there. All the others, they high yallers. That why I call Lucille "Brown Sugar," 'cause she so dark and she so sweet. Most the time, anyway.

Done played my horn all round the world. I love the folks and they love me and we all have us a good old time. Main thing is to live for

\* Armstrong always pronounces "New Orleans" as "New Or-leans."

that audience. That what you there for, to please the people. You know I use to work for Al Capone? Pleased him, too. Fuck, yeah, I done please Al Capone! Tell you what — ain't no goddamn joke working for a cat like that. You not careful, he own you for the rest of your life. Just like you down on the plantation, chopping cotton. Now I never had me no kind of trouble with Capone. Guy you could trust — and he dug colored folks. But I did get myself in bad with some other cats this one time. Scared me half to death.

*Armstrong takes off his dress shoes and white socks and puts on his slippers, revealing that he is wearing support hose. From here to the end of the play, he gradually changes from his tuxedo to casual street clothes that are hanging on the coat rack.*

I been working in New York, playing for the rich people at Connie's Inn up in Harlem. This white guy, Connie Immerman, he own the place. Don't let no spades in, but he'll hire 'em to play, and he like my music. But then the cats in the band start lushing, showing up late for the gig, and Mr. Connie, he done fired our asses. Put us out in the alley and lock the door. So I hopped a train, ended up in Chicago. Got me a gig at this fancy-ass club called the Showboat ... and that's when everything went to shit. 'Cause now I'm playing in Chicago, and Mr. Connie, back in New York, he sees my records is selling and he figure he want me back in Harlem, but I say uh-uh, motherfucker fired me! Kick my ass once, I ain't gonna come back just so you can kick it again. Only he got himself one of them silent partners — know what I mean? (*Confidentially.*) Dutch Schultz. Shit. Man ain't no-body to fuck with. Pull the trigger on you if you don't do what he say, and he done put his own cash money into Connie's Inn.

So Dutch Schultz and Mr. Connie, they put their heads together, and a couple of nights later, this hood come backstage at the Showboat. He walk right up to me and say, "Boy, you playing in New York tomorrow night, you hear?" Now you know I ain't gonna talk back to no cat like that. Gonna be cool, play dumb. So I say, "Well, uh, I got me a job to play right here in Chicago, you know?" Then the son of a bitch pull out this big revolver, barrel look like it's a foot long, thumb back the trigger till it click real loud, point at the phone booth. "Over there, boy. You got you a long-distance call to make. You call up Mr. Connie in Harlem and you say, 'Mr. Connie, I'm working at your place tomorrow night.' You got that? Tomorrow night." I look down at all that steel in his hand and I say, "Uuuuhh, maybe I *do* open in New York tomorrow!"

# SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF

by Terry Teachout

1M (doubling)

SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF is a one-man, three-character play in which the same actor portrays Louis Armstrong, the greatest of all jazz trumpeters; Joe Glaser, his white manager; and Miles Davis, who admired Armstrong's playing but disliked his onstage manner. It takes place in 1971 in a dressing room backstage at the Empire Room of New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, where Armstrong performed in public for the last time four months before his death. Reminiscing into a tape recorder about his life and work, Armstrong seeks to come to terms with his longstanding relationship with Glaser, whom he once loved like a father but now believes to have betrayed him. In alternating scenes, Glaser defends his controversial decision to promote Armstrong's career (with the help of the Chicago mob) by encouraging him to simplify his musical style, while Davis attacks Armstrong for pandering to white audiences.

*"By the show's end, you sense the profound fortitude that lay beneath the avuncular surface of this giant, and you are newly appreciative of his singular place in history."*

—The New York Times

*"An extraordinarily rich and complex characterization."*

—The New Yorker

*"A trenchant portrait of the artist."*

—New York Post

*"A complex and finely shaded picture ... of an artist coping with racism."*

—New York Daily News

*"A deep, impassioned bio-play about a jazz legend ... a work of insight and power."*

—Boston Globe

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