

Heartbreak and humor

End of an era in 'Side Man'

by Jeanie Forte Smith



Palo Alto
o n l i n e

Warren Leight pays homage to a nearly forgotten world of jazz and its musicians in "Side Man," Dragon Productions' latest production in downtown Palo Alto. He also chronicles one young man's journey to free himself from a lifetime of co-dependence on his dysfunctional family.

While the play sometimes feels a little torn between these two themes, the performance never wavers from excellence, ultimately delivering a provocative, entertaining and satisfying evening of theater. Funny and touching, the piece won the 1999 Tony for Best New Play, but is seldom seen. It reminds us of a great era — and also of some life lessons along the way.

Clifford (Alex Hersler) is the young man, who narrates the play and performs as himself at several ages. Initially, he has returned to New York to make long-delayed contact with his father, who is a trumpet side man in a down-on-its-heels lounge bar. Gene, or "Genie" (Kurt Gravenhorst), continues to slog along in the convention of playing pick-up gigs whenever and wherever he can, with his few buddies who also eke out a living night after night in search of the elusive career. They're apparently solid players — Ziggy (Jim Johnson), Al (George Mauro) and Jonesy (Michael Champlin) — but none of them good enough to reach the next level of employment.

The story jumps to a flashback, when Gene first met Terry (Sandy Rouge), who becomes his wife and Clifford's mother, so that we see the genesis of their relationship and a context for understanding later events. Jumping again in time we also meet Patsy (Patricia Tyler), waitress at the lounge and erstwhile wife and/or mistress to nearly all the jazz musicians she knows. As immersed as she is in the lifestyle of the men, she nevertheless tries to help Clifford come to terms with the past and the reality of his parents.

We begin witnessing the past — the history of Terry and Gene, Clifford's early childhood — and simultaneously hear about the world of jazz at this ground level. It's a world that includes unemployment lines, junkies and addicts, difficulty paying the rent, certified Bohemian trappings like Wilhelm Reich's Orgone box, and booze, lots of booze. We hear odes to Clifford Brown and Miles Davis and other jazz greats, and get the inside track on life on the road or one-night gigs.

But is the play about that world, or about Clifford's dismal childhood as his mother begins to drown herself in alcohol, and his father continues to pursue a dying art? It doesn't much matter, as both story threads are interesting, but at times I felt pulled between them. Just as another page of Clifford's story was revealed, the play would then suddenly switch to another paean to the world of jazz in decline.

This is a minor quibble with the script — the performances are so good in this ensemble piece that it's well worth seeing, and then you can decide for yourself where the play's heart lies. My money is on the Gene-Terry-Clifford story, a compelling look at one family's inexorable slide into dysfunction. You don't have to live those circumstances to empathize with the sad reality here. And it's not all sad. There's much humor, and hope and love — even at the end, which is really Clifford's beginning.

Gravenhorst is perfect as the long-suffering and yet emotionally removed jazz-man, at once pathetic and loveable, eternally optimistic while beaten down. He conveys intellectual intelligence and willful ignorance in equal measure, and convincingly ages to a weariness born of hard knocks. The penultimate scene between Genie and Clifford is heartbreakingly real.

Rouge as Terry is a major find, a true stage presence, authentic to the core, naive in one moment, reeking in an alcoholic rage the next. Her deterioration from hopeful young musician's wife to dotty dipsomaniac is all too believable and at times wrenching. She and Gravenhorst run a terrific counterpoint to each other, and never lose touch with the love that brought the ill-fated couple together in the first place.

Hersler is fine as Clifford, with the difficult task of weaving all the threads together, and not wallowing in self-pity as Clifford's harrowing upbringing is revealed. The other sidemen do a great job as the actual sidekicks of the play, giving us much amusement as well as other plights to observe. Tyler has fun with the irrepressible Patsy, and also has the requisite talent to bring off her serious scenes with Clifford.

Ron Gasparinetti's evocative set makes economical use of the tiny Dragon stage space, giving us the seedy lounge, the cramped apartment and numerous other locales, aided by Jocelyn Squires' excellent lighting design. Magenta Brooks nicely captures the various decades and types in the costumes. Someone on the production team deserves mention for a splendid sound design, giving us appropriate jazz snippets throughout and wonderful pre-show and intermission music.

Director Dale Albright deserves kudos for assembling this fine cast in an interesting play, and for his lively and compelling staging. Don't miss this first-rate offering from the Dragon.

What: "Side Man," by Warren Leight, presented by Dragon Productions

Where: Dragon Theatre, 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

When: Through Dec. 6, with 8 p.m. shows Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. matinees on Sundays

Cost: Tickets range from \$16 to \$20.

Info: Go to www.dragonproductions.net or call 650-493-2006.