

## 'Side Man' smooth and insightful

November 19, 2009, 03:42 AM By Keith Kreitman

It is highly unlikely that anyone who had not gone through the experience could have written "Side Man." To me it was like "deja vu" because it covers a period in popular music during the late 1940s and early 1950s that I experienced myself. As a member of the Chicago Musicians Union, I knew a number of sidemen.



Dale Albright  
Kurt Gravenhorst stars in Dragon Productions' 'Side Man.'

A definition of a "side man" from the dictionary: "A professional musician who is hired to perform or record with a group of which he is not a regular member, required him to be adaptable to many different styles of music and so able to fit smoothly into the group in which they are currently playing."

Most I knew were highly talented. They needed to be to be sought out by band booking agents often enough to earn a living for themselves and their families, if any. The place that most often occurred was on union hall floor. So, they would hang out there most of the day and, consequently, would build up deep friendships with other sidemen waiting to pick up "gigs" and, in some cases, form relationships and bonding that was something like family and, often, even stronger.

That is the underlying story in "Side man." Gene Glimmer (Kurt Gravenhorst), a remarkably good trumpeter, is the core of the story. His son Clifford (Alex Hersler) narrates the story over a period of three decades as it acts out in a flashback fashion on the stage. Gene's deepest and lifelong friends among other sidemen are Jonesy (Michael Champlin), Ziggy (Jim Johnson) and Al (George Mauro).

The thing about such musicians, even extending on into the "rock" music period, is their devotion to their "art" first, that renders their family life, at best, an inconvenient drag on their time. I've seen that also among aspiring playwrights and actors, but the special feature among popular music artists is the entrée into the culture of the drug world.

Although Gene is not one of these, his refusal to accept a regular job leaves the economic support of the family an ongoing tenuous condition and the family life begins to degenerate. His marginal emotional support of his wife Terry (Sandy Rouge) drives her from naivety into extreme anger and finally alcoholism. As a result, Clifford assumes the "father" role in the family as early as 10 years old as Gene and his "sidemen" bunch live on as "buddies" in perpetual adolescence.

The scenes on the open stage (another winner for set designer Ron Gasparinetti) move from the family's sparsely furnished apartment to nightclubs and even the floor of an unemployment office (another gathering place for the often unemployed sidemen).

A secondary role is played Patsy (Patricia Tyler), the waitress at one of the jazz joints, who has successively married several of Gene's side men buddies.

This play, deservedly, won the 1999 Tony Award for best play. It is a dramatic and moving exploration of a culture that has faded away with the end of the "big band" era, one that died off with the ascension of the Beatles and the guitar-driven rock era that subordinated creative jazz and emotional ballads.

The casting is excellent, populated with familiar faces from the remarkable local theater scene. I was impressed with Sandy Rouge's portrayal of descent from engaging young naivety through debilitating anger into the shell of a woman ravaged by alcoholism.

I was particularly impressed with Alex Hersler, a recent theater school graduate, new to the Peninsula theater scene.

His performance is at three levels. Acting the role in real time and momentarily breaking with side comments to the audience and, thirdly, projecting remarkably nuanced facial expressions which, like a one-person "Greek Chorus," was conveying his true feelings about the conduct of the other characters on the stage. A real talent.

Another winner for Dragon Productions.

IF YOU GO:

'Side Man'

By: Warren Leight.

PERFORMED BY: Dragon Productions. Directed by Dale Albright

WHERE: 535 Alma St., Palo Alto

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursday to Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday through Dec. 6

TICKETS: \$16 to \$20

CONTACT: (800) 823-3006 or [www.dragonproductions .net/tickets](http://www.dragonproductions.net/tickets)