




Louis Armstrong in 1955.

By
Terry Teachout

From the Page to the stage



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 joyous entertainer who sang “Hello, Dolly!” and “What a Wonderful World” and 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. Like all geniuses, Satchmo was complicated, and that complexity was part of what made his music so beautiful and profound.

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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 show an audience what he was like off stage. 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, his white manager. (Miles Davis,



Louis Armstrong and Grace Kelly on the set of *High Society* in 1956.

the third character, came along later.) 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*, it was as though Armstrong's shadow had suddenly appeared on stage, dark and threatening. All at once I had my villain, the lingo to Satchmo's Othello—though, like all the best villains, Glaser isn't nearly as simple, or evil, as he looks.

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Satchmo at the Waldorf takes place March of 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, Glaser, and Davis say in the play derives from things that they said in real life, and the way in which the three men talk on stage is an accurate portrayal of their habits of speech, right down to the last twelve-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 relationships, which were 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 their endless subtleties.

The most exciting part of writing a play is what happens after you write it, because theatrical production is by definition collaborative. I have previously worked on *Satchmo* with four actors (Dennis Neal, John Douglas Thompson, Barry Shabaka Henley, and Craig Wallace) and four directors (Rus Blackwell, Gordon Edelstein, Charles Newell, and Eleanor Holdridge). Each contributed to the process of transforming the play from a black-and-white sketch into a full-color painting, lifting my words off the page and putting them on the stage. These



collaborations inspired me to try my own hand at directing *Satchmo*, which I did for the first time in 2016 at Palm Beach Dramaworks. The Alley's production is my second outing as a director, and just as it is very different from the one I directed in Palm Beach, so does it differ from its other predecessors without necessarily being "righter." It is nothing more—or less—than another way of looking at the show, one that owes at least as much to the superlatively imaginative acting of Jerome Preston Bates and the brilliant work of the Alley's design team as it does to my own script and staging. To paraphrase what Dizzy Gillespie is supposed to have said of Armstrong, "No them, no me."



Louis Armstrong in 1953.

Satchmo at the Waldorf was my first play. I followed it last year with *Billy and Me*, a biographical play about Tennessee Williams and William Inge that was premiered in December by Palm Beach Dramaworks. Unlikely as it may sound, though, I'd never given any serious thought to writing a play of my own until I sat down in 2010 to write the first draft of *Satchmo*. I am, after all, a drama critic—I cover theater for *The Wall Street Journal*—and while a fair number of critics have written plays, it doesn't happen very often. Drama critics 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 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 version that you're about to see is—I hope—a journey.

Terry Teachout is the drama critic of *The Wall Street Journal*. *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, his first play, has been produced Off-Broadway and in Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and throughout America. He has also written biographies of Louis Armstrong, George Balanchine, Duke Ellington, and H.L. Mencken.

