

# Theater: Louis Armstrong Solo? No Sweat For John Douglas Thompson

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**SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

### WESTSIDE THEATRE

It's official: If actor John Douglas Thompson is in it, you need to see it. For several years now, I've been blown away by the talent of Thompson in just about everything I've seen him in. He even brought conviction and some much needed passion to the Broadway flop *A Time To Kill*. But it's tackling the classics where he's shined: an exceptionally memorable *Othello*, a strong *Emperor Jones* and too many others to mention. (I can't wait to see him in the ensemble of *The Iceman Cometh* when that arrives from the Goodman someday soon, I hope.)

Now he's been given the opportunity to bring the iconic artist Louis Armstrong to life in a far better than average bio-play and Thompson rises to the occasion. Razor sharp, intelligent, funny and winning -- he actually doesn't look anything like Armstrong (or the jazz giant's manager Joe Glaser or Miles Davis, for that matter), but Thompson embodies the man completely. Playwright Terry Teachout drew upon his acclaimed biography called *Pops: A Life Of Louis Armstrong* for the story. His most recent book is a biography of Duke Ellington. No doubt, if he turns that into a play, Thompson would capture that dapper genius just as handily.

In typical bio-play fashion, we are in the dressing room of Armstrong after a performance at the Waldorf, one of the last gigs of his storied career. Armstrong slowly gets out of his stage clothes, puts on his street duds, starts a tape recorder and tells tales from his life. We've seen it all before. Happily, Teachout has delivered a strong tale in that musty frame, one that is inevitably shadowed by race.

Armstrong's career is of course a marvel. His mother was a prostitute, he scrounged for change by doing various odd jobs to keep bread on the table and a run-in with the law proved a blessing: he went to juvie but ended up with a lifelong love of music. The trumpet would take him out of Storyville and onto the world stage. He was, simply, the greatest trumpeter in the world, not to mention a world-class composer, a tremendously influential singer and a showman to boot. Here's a video promo for the Long Wharf mounting of this play.

Beyond the personal surprises for those who don't know him (Armstrong enjoyed cursing with vigor and smoking pot, for example), Satchmo captures the complex vagaries of racism and how it affected his career. Armstrong bluntly says he would never really make it out of the juke joint circuit without a white manager. A run-in with mobsters was the eventual spur and he hooked up with Joe Glaser, who helped Armstrong concentrate on music while Glaser took care of everything else.

The partnership worked beautifully, with Armstrong going from success to unparalleled stardom, a figure recognized literally everywhere in the world. Often seen as genial and joking, Armstrong describes how this was a natural outgrowth of his personality and good advice from his manager: keep the people happy. He saw Glaser as his best friend, but also notes after a certain point that Glaser never had Armstrong over to his home. (Neither did Bing Crosby, whom he speaks of admiringly.) Armstrong broke down barrier after barrier but was seen as an Uncle Tom by some blacks who couldn't distinguish between a fawning nature and a naturally sunny disposition. (Miles Davis appears at brief moments with some scathing commentary.)

Armstrong denounces such slurs as wrong but also admits they sting. Even worse, with rock and roll taking over, jazz became side-tracked commercially. Audiences became older and older and almost entirely white. (One line in the play notes that the audience began to look like a carton of eggs and cynically says it hasn't changed a bit, knowing perfectly well that the audience for live theater will let the bitter irony of this play about Armstrong reaching an almost all-white audience remain just as potent.)

But was Armstrong a fool? Glaser has died and left him not a single piece of the booking company that grew almost entirely on the success of Armstrong. He's bitter and angry and confused about this betrayal; that complicates his own questioning of race and who to trust and where people really stand. Just as telling, Teachout lets us draw our own conclusions about Miles Davis and his blithe dismissal of Armstrong's history and how many barriers he broke down, not to mention the privileged upbringing in comparison that Davis enjoyed.

It's a complicated mess, race, and Armstrong's life illuminates it in telling, fascinating detail. Director Gordon Edelstein keeps the entire evening nicely paced and focused, with a fine set by Lee Savage that simply and effectively switches from backstage to a city skyline for the scenes featuring the manager Glaser. Mind you, they seem so simple and effective in part because Thompson switches with such ease from one character to another, letting the tired old Armstrong have his dignity while the pugnacious, fast-talking Glaser struts around with his no-nonsense demeanor. He didn't know a damn thing about music, really and Armstrong is right when he says Glaser really didn't care. (Though the feeling at the time that Satchmo was washed up for decades is belied by the more recent appreciation of his 1950s and 1960s output.)

But a telling final bit of information puts their relationship into yet another light, one that allows us to know Armstrong was no fool. He was a prolific recorder of himself for many years, dragging around a reel to reel and chatting away all the time on it. You used to be able to go his home in Queens and after a tour call up a recording from any date that was available to hear snatches of what he was saying. Often, it was casually profane, usually rambling and sometimes insightful. (NOTE; My memory was a little faulty but check out the helpful comment below and check out the [Louis Armstrong House Museum website](#) for more info about this great cultural landmark that is still going strong.) Teachout has created a play that does a good job of capturing that voice while distilling the insights he had into Armstrong while writing that biography. Like any writer (or composer), he's also very lucky to have an artist like Thompson bring it to life.

NOTE: Finally, for sheer joy, not much can match Louis Armstrong swinging in "Potato Head Blues," an early instrumental from the era when he was literally creating jazz.

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