

THEATRICAL REVIEW

Play flows like musician's solo

By Mark Hughes Cobb
Staff Writer

SIDE MAN

■ **What:** Play by Warren Leight, performed by the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance.

■ **When:** Continues at 7:30 p.m. tonight through Saturday, closing with a 2 p.m. matinee Sunday.

■ **Where:** Marian Galloway Theatre, Rowand Johnson Hall, UA campus.

■ **Cost:** \$12 for students, \$15 seniors, \$18 adults

■ **More:** 205-348-3400.
www.theatre.ua.edu.

The memory play "Side Man" is about the kind of musician whose name should be legend — in a career marred, ironically, by bad timing.

The play ripples like an improvised solo, but tied to a steady back beat. Like the best solos, it hits heights, sustains bridges and carries the wave forward to something ineffable.

Warren Leight's play, based on the life of his jazz man father Donald, returns often to the question "Why Was I Born?," referring literally to the Kern-Hammerstein song, but directly to why Clifford Glimmer, the son of Gene and Terry Glimmer, exists. Like notes in the air, the query touches down, then fades away.

Clifford (Jacob Valleroy) sees Gene (Chris Bellinger) and Terry (Abby Jones) through unblinking, but sympathetic eyes. The cliché of living for the stage fits Gene; he's almost a cipher when not playing, apt to go blank in the midst of a conversation, hearing music even when it's not playing.

Bellinger breaks through in rare moments when life snaps its fingers in his face and demands attention, like on first meeting young Terry, a bit of an innocent but with a hint of hard shell showing through in sometimes snappy banter. It's a nice scene of seduction that plays believably, yet with the shorthand reflecting only what Clifford was told, as clearly he wasn't on the scene yet.

It's also foreshadowing, of a sort, in a play that jumps around from the early '50s to mid '80s: If Gene were capable of paying sustained attention, he'd have noticed how she let slip her nickname: Crazy Terry.

In musical notation, that'd be at least a fermata, possibly followed by a fortissimo "See ya!"

Valleroy carries the load of the narrative ably, with an airy ease that assures nothing horrifying will happen, which is not exactly true, but mostly. This isn't "Death of a Trumpeter." He's a likable presence, if something of a cipher as written, like his pop.

We get glimpses of struggle between the practical and the artistic — Clifford's been offered a lucrative job writing ad copy, but would rather go to art school — and as the child of an often-oblivious guy and an increasingly rage-filled alcoholic mom, takes on the caretaker role at far too young an age. One of the puzzles is why Clifford

views his past with such affection. Does the music really cure all?

Like the side man of the title, a player who can either blend or step up to solo, Bellinger works with patient control. As a younger man, he's more focused, especially when he shows Terry, as a young would-be flautist, how to swing Debussy's "Afternoon of a Faun." He pops back in when Terry flies into a rage at his suggestion they end her pregnancy, again in a perhaps romanticized moment from the boy who wasn't yet there.

Jones riffs on a lot more high notes, from the somewhat-innocent young lady in the big city through the game girlfriend trying to jump into an already established melody — Gene's most often seen with fellow players Al (Cooper Kennard), a slightly offbeat ladies' man; Ziggy (Jeff Horger), a wisecracking mensch; and Jonesy (Michael Luwoye), a one-eyed man with a drug problem — and on into the gradually maddened housewife. She's a joy as an expletive-flinging mess, and makes it easy to see why Gene would glide past the nickname.

Director Stacy Alley's affection for this work shows in the way it's kept in a kind of glow reflecting Clifford's nostalgia, a naturalistic, easygoing pace that doesn't force anything. It shows through in even less-spotlighted roles such as Patsy (Carrie Poh), the waitress at the guys' favorite dive who winds up sleeping with or marrying many of them.

Poh's nicely outlined reality, along with that of the boys' familiar-feeling interplay, is grounded in such a way that the drugs, sex and wild nights seem just part of the furnishings, not unremarkable, but solid, expected. Andy Fitch's set, a flexible and yet unmoving concoction that manages to stand in for several different places with simple lighting and prop changes, is a little more notable in that those changes never break the show's easy momentum.

This "Side Man" is often funnier that it has any right to be, partly due to Jones' pop-eyed anger, partly because Leight gives us a few meta-moments in which Jones yells from offstage "Who are you talking to?" at Valleroy's narration. No one's really an unforgivable monster or, on the other end, so godlike that exceptions are expected. Gene really should have been more there for his family, master musician or not.

Although there's no live jazz in this production, which seems a bit odd, in the second act there's a lingering chance to actually breathe in the music, a stirring, soaring solo by Clifford Brown — the boy's namesake — who died in a car accident at just 25. Someone remarks he's playing as if he knew it was his last shot.

The guys hear their end coming, but at a slower beat, so they maintain a more even strain. From all the confusion, booze and smoke, Clifford doesn't get his answer, but implies one instead: Why was anyone born? To love.