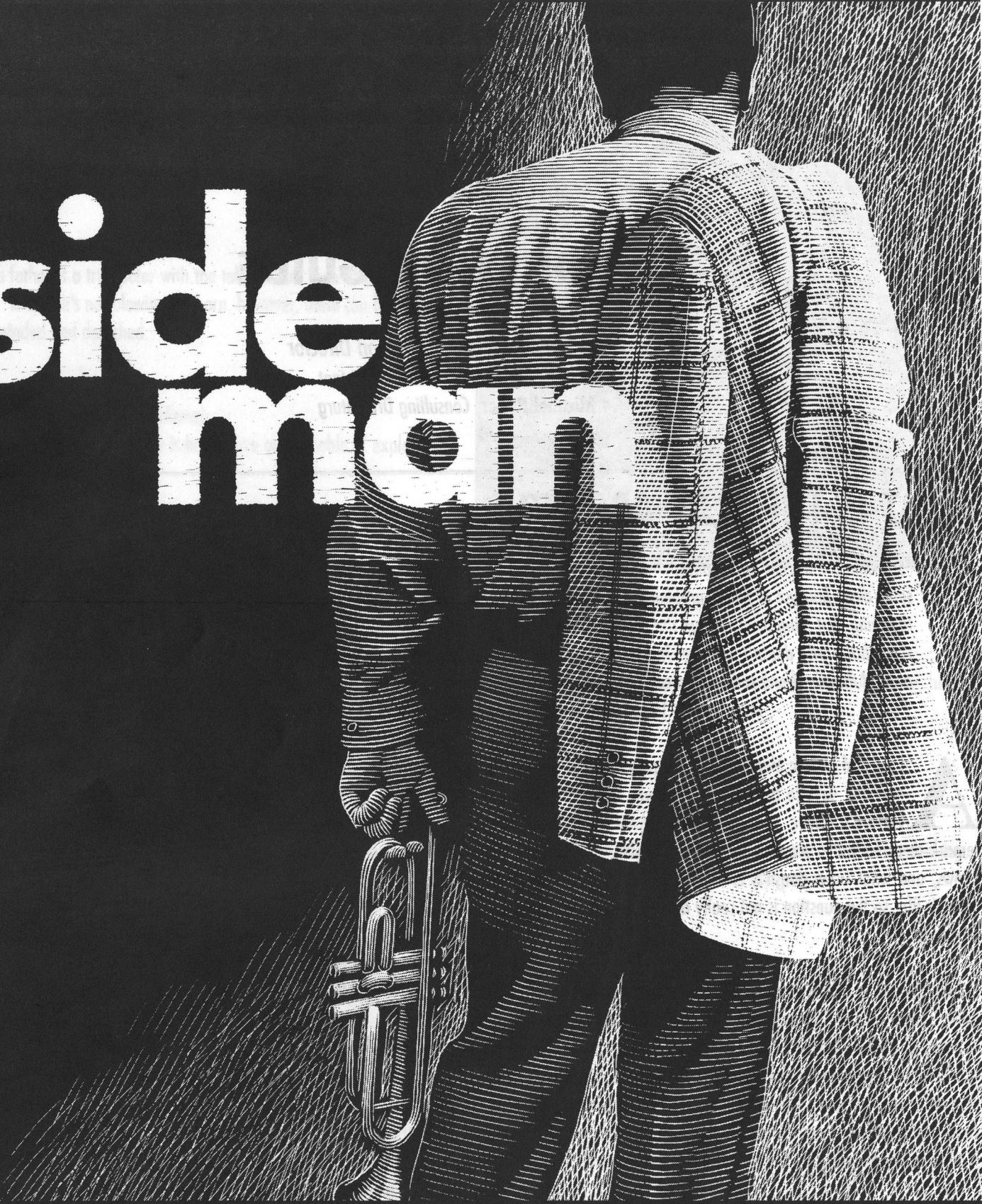


Roundabout Theatre Company



side  
man

The Chase Family Series Production Guide

# side man

by Warren Leight  
directed by Michael Mayer

## PRODUCTION GUIDE

written by

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### WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

*"So when a musician settles down—and usually they settle down because of family problems; marriages are the thing that hang musicians up the most—it's only right that a wife doesn't want her husband wandering around the world and she's left to raise the kids"*

- Stan Kenton, 1940's Bandleader.

At the end of *Side Man*, Clifford, the play's central character and narrator, says to his father, "Why was I born?" Since Gene, Clifford's father, is a jazz musician, he interprets Clifford's remark as a request to play the song with that title. What the audience knows, and what Gene doesn't, is that Clifford has been reviewing his family's life, so the question is not really a song request, but a search for meaning.

During the course of the play, Clifford invites the audience to watch as his parents meet for the first time, move into an apartment, and deal with the vagaries of a jazz musician's life. Gene is a sideman, one of the musicians in a band who back up the star vocalist or instrumentalist. The audience is also introduced to Gene's friends who are also jazz musicians, and through their experiences, we see the problems of working in a musical form that is slowly disappearing.

By featuring the character of a son who confronts his father about the meaning of his life, *Side Man* covers familiar territory in American drama.

The play belongs to the tradition of other classic plays like Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing*, and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Unlike the sons in the other plays, the son in *Side Man* isn't protesting the emotional hollowness of his father's life, but lack of structure, discipline, and steadiness—qualities usually embodied by the paternal character. Clifford doesn't want freedom, he wants order, and a life where he doesn't have to fear an emergency phone call at four a.m. The traditional dramatic protest, therefore, is reversed in *Side Man*: rather than seeking an escape from suffocation and repression into freedom, this Clifford longs for an escape into security.

However, *Side Man* does not present the conflict between Gene's love of self-expression and his obligations as father and husband in black and white terms. Clifford may yearn for the financial and emotional security he never had, but he is a frustrated artist, too. Though he studied at an art school, he later took a job writing commercials at an ad agency. The artist's siren song still calls to him, and by the end of the play he may well throw over security and head out for the territory.

Because Clifford's future is uncertain, the question at the end could easily be changed from "Why was I born?" to "Where am I going?" And when you think about it, those questions, which are essential to any character's life, are almost identical.



# WHO'S WHO

## **CLIFFORD** (played by Robert Sella):

As a 29-year-old man, Clifford is trying to make sense of his family. When tension arises, he tries to smooth things out. He feels obligated to support his family financially, yet at heart he is an artist, yearning to be free.

## **GENE** (played by Frank Wood):

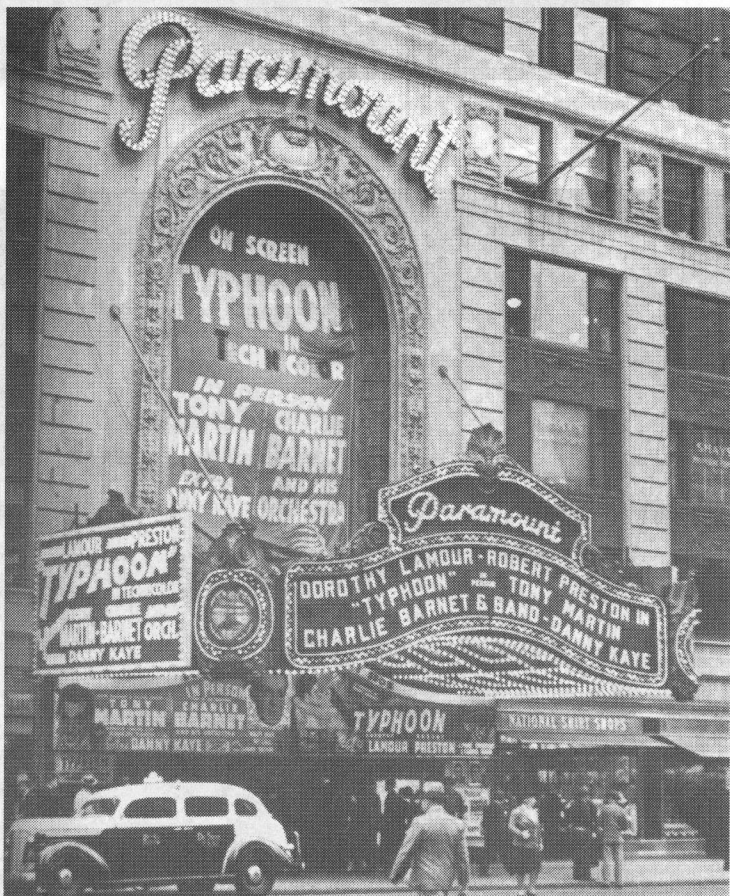
Clifford's father is a trumpeter with the talent to be "one of the greats." When he's not blowing his horn, however, Gene can be a bit absent-minded and detached.

## **TERRY** (played by Wendy Makkena):

A highly sensitive woman, Terry is both naive and capable of explosive emotional outbursts.



*The anonymous sideman*



*The Paramount Theatre, a home for Big Bands in New York, was just adjacent to Stage Right on Broadway*

## **AL** (played by Joseph Lyle Taylor):

A trumpet-player who has played in bands with Gene, Al fancies himself quite the ladies' man.

## **ZIGGY** (played by Michael Mastro):

Possessing a speech impediment and aspirations to write for television, Ziggy is hardly the hippest musician in the group.

## **JONESY** (played by Kevin Geer):

A trombone player hooked on heroin, Jonesy is able to comprehend people clearly through the fog of his addiction.

## **PATSY** (played by Angelica Torn):

As a waitress in a bar, she's seen it all. Patsy doesn't have an enormous tolerance for men, which explains why she's had so many husbands.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Warren Leight: A New York Kid

"Playwriting I think of essentially as my jazz. Theatre is all about the writer's words, or like jamming, rather than studio screenwriting which is like paint-by-numbers."

— Warren Leight

Warren Leight grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side, in an apartment building that housed several musicians, including his own father, who was a jazz trumpet player. Warren was discouraged from pursuing music as a child, but he thought of himself as a writer from a young age.

When he began writing professionally, he booked writing jobs like a musician books jazz gigs, one right after the other as soon as they became available. This method meant he wound up taking a wide variety of jobs: writing for magazines and newspapers like the *Village Voice*, *Mademoiselle* and *National Lampoon*, as well as screenplays for documentary and feature films. He also wrote cabaret acts, helping performers create their biographies, or as he says, "Trying to make some sense out of other people's lives for them."

Though Warren Leight has written in several forms, his work has revolved around the subject of New York. In 1984, he wrote the satirical *I Hate New York* guidebook. A few years later, he wrote the libretto for the musical *Mayor* (about Mayor Ed Koch). Then in 1993, he wrote and directed the screen play for *The Night We Never Met*, which was set in Brooklyn. It's not surprising why Leight calls himself "a New York kid."

One can find all of Leight's familiar themes and subjects in *Side Man*. The play features a collection of musicians, it presents a character investigating his family's biography, and it is set in New York. In fact, because the play is so indicative of his writing, one could say that Warren Leight was destined to write *Side Man*.

By featuring the character of a son who confronts his father about the meaning of his life, *Side Man* covers familiar territory in American drama.



Warren Leight (left) and Michael Mayer

## COLLABORATING ON A NEW PLAY

The process of creating a new play is a rather complex one, going through different phases of development. The play will start as an idea in a playwright's mind and with the help of the director and actors he can develop it into a full-length play. Usually, the director is the first person the playwright brings in. The playwright and the director then discuss key ideas in the play and which actors they feel would be appropriate for the different roles in the play.

Often a new play will be undergo several preliminary productions, called workshop productions. A workshop can be like a scaled-down theatrical performance, with a short rehearsal period and only a few performances with minimal scenery and costumes. During the workshop process, the director and actors provide the playwright with their views on the play and its characters, and the playwright often rewrites sections of the play taking their ideas into account. Audience members often are also asked to provide the writer with their impressions of the play. So while the playwright is a central role in creating a new play, his collaborators can also have a great impact on the final product.

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

### The Mercurial Michael Mayer

Michael Mayer's career as a director has been one filled with diversity. The plays he has directed cover a wide spectrum of styles and audiences.

On Broadway, Mayer recently staged Roundabout's production of *A View from the Bridge* (which later transferred to another theatre, the Neil Simon), and the musical *Triumph of Love*. He's also directed several shows Off-Broadway, at such theatres like the Atlantic Theatre, the New York Theatre Workshop, and the CSC Repertory Theatre. In fact, both *Side Man* and *Triumph of Love* began at the CSC Repertory before moving to Broadway. When *Side Man* officially opens at the Roundabout on June 25, it will be only two days before Mayer closes another show, *Stupid Kids*, at the WPA Theatre downtown.

Mayer's success is due, in part, to a relationship he developed while in school. While studying directing at NYU, Michael became friends with another theatre student, Tony Kushner. Later, Kushner asked Mayer to direct the national touring production of *Angels in America*. Many people credit this production with giving Mayer his "big break" as a director.

Given the great diversity of plays he's directed—dramas, musicals, comedies, Broadway and Off Broadway—it might not be surprising that Mayer finds his style a little difficult to define. He explains, "What I try to do is not to impose a concept on the play. I let the text dictate the production."

While audiences for *Side Man* may notice some similarities with *A View From the Bridge*—both plays revolve around families in New York during the 1950s—they should not expect the productions of the two plays to resemble each other. The only thing audiences should expect from Michael Mayer is to expect something different.



# FROM BIG BAND TO BEBOP

In the thirties and into the forties, many sidemen made their living as members of the big bands that dominated the swing era, led by men like Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Count Basie, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. But after World War Two, the big bands found it increasingly difficult to stay in business. The economics of touring had changed, and thanks in part to the shortages of the war years, touring a band of 16 or 20 men had become economically unfeasible. Musical tastes were changing, too: ironically, the “boy” and “girl” singers made famous by the bands — the Frank Sinatras and Ella Fitzgeralds — supplanted the bands in popularity. And swing, the staple of the big bands, was being challenged by a new kind of jazz: bebop.

Bebop was considered more intellectual, more difficult to listen to than swing, and — crucially — almost impossible to dance to. Despite this reputation, some of the big bands persisted by playing bebop in the late forties and early fifties. Claude Thornhill’s band, mentioned by the characters in *Side Man*, was one of the most progressive-sounding bebop big bands; it even included two French horns and a tuba in addition to the usual brass and winds. Thornhill’s band was one of the most respected in the business; Thelonious Monk, bop pianist and composer, called it, “the only really good big band I’ve heard in years.”



Stan Kenton and his band

The bands of Stan Kenton and Woody Herman also specialized in bebop despite the fact that the large audiences that preferred swing didn’t much like its hard-driving energy, its esoteric chords and its often dark emotional underpinnings. “Everybody can blame Woody Herman and Dizzy Gillespie and me for ruining the dance band business,” Kenton said. “We ruined it because we were determined to play the kind of music we wanted to play.” Kenton’s bands managed to hang on into the sixties, but bebop increasingly became the music of smaller, more intimate combinations of musicians. And many bebop musicians seemed more interested in playing for their colleagues than reaching a broad audience. Widespread popularity of the sort enjoyed by the old bands, by the Louis Armstrongs and Billie Holidays, was suddenly something to be disdained.



A “progressive” Big Band - The Peter Rugulo Orchestra



# ACTIVITIES:

## BEFORE YOU SEE THE PLAY

Listening to music is a crucial part of a musician's life. At one point in the play, several musicians listen to a rare jazz recording and are moved by the expressive performance of the musician on the recording.

Find a jazz record from several years ago, perhaps one that features a big band, and listen to it several times. As you listen, try to answer the following questions:

How many different instruments can you hear?

How many people do you think are playing in the band?

Which instruments do you hear playing the melody and solos and which do you hear in the back ground?

As you listen, which emotions and ideas come to mind?

After you are familiar with the older recording, listen to a more recent jazz recording, and compare the two.

Do you hear the same type of instruments?

How many musicians do you think are playing?

What do you think it would be like for a musician to play both types of music?

Does the music have the same emotional qualities as the earlier recording?

Does it seem as though this type of music is related to a particular visual style?

## DURING THE PLAY

The narrator of the play, Clifford, is caught in a struggle between his parents. His mother can be short-tempered and violent while his father can be "out of it." Part of Clifford's role in the play is to alleviate the tension between his parents and create a family life that is stable.

As you watch the play, think how you would feel if you were caught between people who are close to you (family members or close friends). How would you act in this situation? How do you tell someone who is close to you that you also care for someone they do not like?

## AFTER THE PLAY

Though *Side Man* is not strictly autobiographical, the play's author and central character possess some important traits. Both Warren Leight and Clifford are the sons of jazz trumpeters, and both men are artists (Leight is a writer, Clifford a visual artist).

The lead character of the play leads the audience through key points in his family's life, many of which occurred before he was born.

Can you write the story of your family before you were born? What are the key events of your family history that have affected your life? Feel free to write in any style you'd like: poetry, short-story, or drama. When you're finished share your writing with members of your family or other people who are interested in your life. We also invite you to submit your writing to the Roundabout, and we may post it on our Website!

Send your writing to: **Margaret Salvante, Education Director**

Roundabout Theatre Company

1530 Broadway

New York, NY 10036

or to:

margies@roundabouttheatre.org

# WEBSITE:

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

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<http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

**Production Guide**  
*Side Man*

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**Welcome to The Chase Family Series at Roundabout!**

*Side Man* : **Saturday, June 13 or Sunday, August 16, 1998**

**Show begins at 2:00pm**

**Preshow reception begins at 1:00pm**

Your family subscription includes:

- a production guide for you to review as a family before coming to the theatre;
- admittance to our pre-show reception for family subscribers only, scheduled to take place before the show in the lobby;
- participation in a post-performance discussion with members of the cast.

Remember to come early **Saturday, June 13 or Sunday, August 16, 1998 at 1:00 PM** to enjoy refreshments and participate in a discussion with our Education Director before seeing the show. Please note that all discussions are reserved for young subscribers and their adult guests.

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