

Tom Waits in Chicago,
July 8, 1986

Man walks into a bar.

Tom Waits sees the same man: an empty stomach stalking the tavern, wearing last week's mustard on his sleeve with 57 varieties of Heinz bleeding through a paisley polyester shirt that's been in and out of Amvets more times than a punk from Wilmette.

Within detail there is life, and that's the world of Tom Waits.

Derived from an image-laced Waits song of the same name, "Frank's Wild Years" is a Steppenwolf Theater Company production making its world premiere June 22 at the Briar Street Theater. Previews begin Sunday.

"Frank's Wild Years" is one of many Tom Waits songs that read like dog-eared Raymond Chandler mysteries left out in the rain. In an hourlong interview at the Gaslight Corner across the street from Steppenwolf, Waits explains why he chose "Frank's Wild Years" as the script to co-write with his wife, Kathleen Brennan.

"I like detail - a lot of detail," Waits says, drinking a club soda heavy on the bitters. "I think I like it for that. Blind Chihuahuas. Wife was a spent piece of used jet trash. Things like that." And passages of pure poignancy: "Frank hung his wild years on a nail he drove through his wife's forehead."

As for the catalyst of the song (featured on Waits's 1982 "Swordfishtrombones" album), Waits says Frank is an aggregation of characters he has met.

"The play kind of picks up where the song leaves off (Frank has torched his house, along with Carlos the Chihuahua he despised)," Waits says. "This guy comes from a small town and he went to Vegas to try and be a big-time entertainer. Eight years later he's penniless, it's 30 below and he's wearing a pair of Bermuda shorts in East St. Louis. And he's about ready to have a stroke. He falls asleep on a park bench and he dreams himself home."

Waits portrays Frank. He is the composer of the original score for the play (an album will be recorded in July in Chicago) while Brennan is writer of the play.

Waits isn't a big fan of musicals. "Let's see," Waits says while assessing the cast of characters at the bar. "I liked 'Pennies from Heaven' and I liked 'Threepenny Opera,' and I liked that Dick Shawn one-man show called 'The Second Greatest Entertainer in the World,' but I don't know if you'd consider that a musical. But most of the stuff doesn't appeal to me."

"I guess the idea of a file clerk breaking into song in the middle of the day is too hard for me to take," Waits says. "Fortunately, in our case, we make the lead character an accordion player-entertainer. So it's a little more believable."

Waits says he understands the intricate differences between song and stage. "A play is a different kind of animal," he explains. "You're dealing with the ritual of it all. The rehearsal process is long and difficult because you're talking about something you've never seen before. You're setting out to make a road you can drive on. My nightmare is that I'm going to fall down on stage, forget my lines, start screaming at

somebody in Chinese and they're going to carry me off into the mental ward."

But the rational has always been irrational for Waits, who was born in December, 1949, in the back seat of a Yellow Cab in a hospital loading zone in Pomona, Calif. He has lived among lawn furniture and beer bottles in Hollywood's Tropicana Motor Hotel and stayed at transient hotels like Chicago's Bel-Ray on Belmont Avenue while on the road to play rooms like the Quiet Knight.

Waits says this is the longest he has ever stayed in Chicago (a month), although he looks as if he just hopped off a Charlie Bukowski boxcar. His beatnik goatee seems to be growing back and he is wearing a brown wrinkled suitcoat that is in sync with his rumpled porkpie hat. Coming to the Gaslight straight from rehearsal, Waits is carrying a bulky old attorney's bag that probably has seen more shakedowns than Greyhound casualty Reginald Holzer.

With his back against the wall and feet propped up on his chair, Waits answers questions after bopping back and forth in nervous rocking-chair rhythm. Even in a bar like the Gaslight, which is filled with mirrored booze signs loners sell in the lots of abandoned gas stations, Waits makes an iconoclastic impression.

And Waits tries to make "Frank's Wild Years" as unconventional as possible. "Some is (conventional) and some isn't," he says. "I hope it is going to be unconventional. I'm worried that I'm going to get people that have never seen me in nightclubs and in the middle of the scene they're going to start yelling out requests. As far as the theater audience, I don't know.

"I think (theatergoers are) rather demure," Waits suggests. "They have little purses and little pillbox hats, I guess. Hankies, I guess. I've got a pretty good ideeea of what they look like. They also go to different watering holes.

"But you can't really think of it that way," he says, straightening up. "You have to go out and do what you have to do and they either like it or they don't. A lot of people have been down this road before. We have a great director and a great cast and I'm learning a lot from them. So I'm growing as an artist."

The music for "Frank's Wild Years" is an offshoot of what Waits calls "Halloween" music, kind of a Salvation Army soul that is the eclectic and energetic focus for "Swordfishtrombones" and his most recent album, "Rain Dogs." Much of that is derived from Waits's affinity for the musical gumbo of jazz, blues, soul, Caribbean and African rhythms that comes from New Orleans. His "Heart Attack and Vine" album features New Orleans drummer "Big John" Thomassie (who used to play with Dr. John), and New Orleans pianist Ronnie Baron.

"New Orleans is the bosom of American music," Waits says. "I like any kind of cross-pollination of musical styles and the friction it creates. I like the androgyny. The flies in the buttermilk. In America, the whole idea is to let it dissolve (but) I like the conflict. Things like those Czech-Bavarian bands in Texas like Brave Combo. I like most things before they've been assimilated."

The far-reaching influences of the original score can be seen in Waits's New York band for "Frank's Wild Years." Musical director Greg Cohen plays upright bass while Ralph Carney plays saxophones and violin. Moris Teper (formerly with Captain Beefheart), is guitarist and banjo player, Dr. William Schimmel is on accordion and pump organ, and Michael Blair plays marimba and percussion. (Blair played with

Waits on his European tour and on Elvis Costello's "King of America" album.)

"The stuff on 'Rain Dogs' and 'Swordfishtrombones' is Halloween music and this (in 'Frank's Wild Years') is somewhere between Berlin, New Orleans and Vegas."

Waits likens writing 15 songs for a play to "laying linoleum."

"You have to give consideration where everything else is," Waits says. "You have to cut to fit."

He thinks the discipline of theater has rubbed off on his already-defined songwriting skills. "I'm still finding my way in the dark as an actor, but when I write, I do walk around in somebody else's skin a little bit," Waits says. "I suppose some of that overlaps. The hardest part for me is realizing it's an enormous collaboration. You're bringing your ideas together with a lot of people. You're not necessarily the president of your own dream all the time. You've got to delegate and you learn how to trust other people."

"That's the hardest part," he says. "The whole thing is knit together and it's all made out of spit. I've only done little bit parts in movies (a scuzzy pool hall owner in Francis Ford Coppola's 'Rumblefish,' a stage manager in Coppola's 'The Cotton Club' and a honky-tonk pianist in Sylvester Stallone's 'Paradise Alley') and this is like leaving the ground."

Stephen B. Eich, Steppenwolf's managing director, assesses Waits's work during rehearsals that began April 22 in Chicago: "I think he's doing pretty well," Eich says in a separate interview. "He's never been on stage before and he's adjusting to the rigors and discipline necessary to being an actor. He's got the lines down."

Waits traces his start with the Steppenwolf troupe to the time he saw "Balm in Gilead" in the spring of 1984 in New York. "They had the good taste to include a couple of songs of mine in their production there and at the same we'd been working on this play," Waits says. "We gave it to John (Malkovich, who directed 'Balm' and chose the Waits music) and Terry (Kinney, who directed Steppenwolf productions 'Of Mice and Men' and starred in 'Balm in Gilead' and 'Orphans') to read, and he liked it. It went a lot of places before it went here. We were going to do it out on the West Coast, then we knocked it back to Florida for a while. It's a real rough road putting a play together. Originally, it was going to be with Charlton Heston, Bill Dana, Buddy Greco and Divine."

"Frank's Wild Years" also has changed directors.

On Monday, Kinney departed as the director of "Frank's Wild Years" in favor of Steppenwolf's artistic director, Gary Sinise.

"It wasn't as dramatic as some people would like to make it out to be," Eich says. "In the vaguest sense of the word, they call it artistic differences. We reached a point in the rehearsal process where Terry realized what he wanted to do with the show was different what Tom wanted to do with the show. Since Tom was new with this, we weren't sure if Tom could explain specifically where he was having problems or where Terry was having problems. It reached a point of incompatibility. So Terry thought in the best interests of the company and the project that he should step aside."

Most recently, Sinise directed the Steppenwolf production of "Orphans" in London with Albert Finney.

Waits recalls the collaborations and compromises in the creation of "Frank's Wild Years," with his wife, a short-story writer from Johnsbury, Ill., just outside of McHenry (the focal point for a love ballad on "Swordfishtrombones").

"I met her at a Roy ('Good Rockin' Tonight') Brown concert six years ago on New Year's Eve in Los Angeles," Waits says. "We were married shortly after that."

Waits comes to Chicago from New Orleans after finishing filming "Down by Law," director Jim Jarmusch's followup film to his cult hit "Stranger Than Paradise." Waits plays an unemployed disc jockey who winds up in a New Orleans slammer with a pimp and a tourist.

"It's a neo-beatnik 'Honeymooners' film," Waits says. "It's in black and white with John Lurie and Ellen Barkin. Robbie ('Paris, Texas') Mueller did the photography." The film opened last month at the Cannes Film Festival.

I told Waits about the Mardi Gras where the Rev. John English of Rick's Bonding Agency ("With Rick's, there is no tricks") and I spent the late evening, early morning and late morning hours bailing a friend out of jail.

"Did he get breakfast?" Waits asks.

I told him the cell was as crowded as a 5 p.m. "A" train.

"They should've given him breakfast," Waits snarls.

Details.