

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 8: (Marvin) Neil Simon (July 4, 1927-)

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Primary Works

Plays

New Faces, 1956; *Come Blow Your Horn*, 1963; *Barefoot in the park*, 1964; *The odd couple*, 1966; *Sweet Charity*, 1966; *The star-spangled girl*, 1967; *Promises, promises*, 1969; *The good doctor*, 1974; *California suite*, 1977; *I ought to be in pictures*, 1981; *Fools : a comic fable*, 1981; *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, 1984; *Biloxi blues*, 1986; *Broadway bound*, 1987; *Rumors : a farce*, 1990; *Lost in Yonkers*, 1993; *Jake's Women*, 1994; *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, 1995; *London Suite*, 1996.

Books

*either a collaboration or an adaptation

1959 **Adventures of Marco Polo: A Musical Fantasy* , **Heidi*; 1961 *Come Blow Your Horn*; 1964 *Barefoot In The Park*; 1966 *The Odd Couple* , *Sweet Charity*; 1967 *The Star Spangled Girl*; 1969 *Plaza Suite* , *Promises, Promises*; 1970 *Last Of The Red Hot Lovers*; 1971 *The Gingerbread Lady*; 1972 *The Prisoner Of Second Avenue*; 1973 *The Sunshine Boys*; 1974 *The Good Doctor*; 1975 *God's Favorite Son*; 1977 *California Suite*; 1979 *Chapter Two*; 1980 *They're Playing Our Song*; 1981 *I Ought To Be In Pictures*; *Rewrites: a memoir*, 1996.

Screenplays

*adaptations of another author's works

1966 *After The Fox*; 1967 *Barefoot In The Park*; 1968 *The Odd Couple*; 1970 *The Out-Of-Towners*; 1971 *Plaza Suite*; 1972 *Last Of The Red Hot Lovers*, **The Heartbreak Kid*; 1975 *The*

Prisoner Of Second Avenue, The Sunshine Boys; 1976 Murder By Death; 1977 The Goodbye Girl; 1978 The Cheap Detective, California Suite; 1979 Chapter Two; 1980 Seems Like Old Times

Television Scripts

1972 *The Trouble With People*, NBC

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| [Top](#) | Neil Simon: A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Nicole Sojka

Neil Simon was born on July 4, 1927 in Bronx, New York (Geitner 252) to a garment salesman (253) named Irving and his wife Mamie (252). He was soon given the nickname "Doc" because he was always checking the family with a toy stethoscope (253). Later the nickname would take on new meaning as he begins to write plays that help to relive pain through laughter (254). He spends his childhood years in New York, which will later become the setting for most of his plays (253), and attends DeWitt Clinton High School (254). He graduates at the age of sixteen and decides to enroll in the United States Army Air Force Reserve training program through the New York University (254). In 1945 he is sent to Colorado on active duty and attends the University of Denver until 1946 when he is discharged as a corporal (254).

As a civilian, he decides to go to work at the New York offices of Warner Brothers where his older brother Daniel, or Danny, is also employed (254). While there, the brothers hear that Goodman Ace of CBS is looking for fresh comedy material and so they both enter pieces and are both hired (254). From 1946 to 1961, Simon writes for CBS and NBC including the "Jackie Gleason Show" among others (254). During this time, he marries a dancer named Joan Baim in 1953, with whom he will have two daughters named Ellen and Nancy (Peacock 369). Also, he wins an Emmy Award for 1956 and '57 season of the "The Sid Caesar Show" (Geitner 252). His brother had left writing to become a director but Simon continued to write for television until the Broadway premiere of his first play entitled *Come Blow Your Horn* in 1961 (254).

In his plays, Simon uses humor as a relief, but also as a defense, an escape or as a weapon (254). He tries "to show people how absurdly they live their lives" and he says "I do it through the medium of comedy, but I don't do it just to get a laugh from the audience" (254). He does this in the autobiographical *Come Blow Your Horn*, which is based on Danny and Simon leaving home to pursue their own lives (255). The play is an introduction to what will become Simon's trademarks: "witty dialogue, successful character types and happy endings" (255). Yet it lacks the refinement of later works such as *Barefoot in the Park*, which is thought of as more "mature" than *Come Blow Your Horn* (255).

Barefoot in the Park opens in 1963 and is very successful with 1,532 shows (255) and later winning Simon a Tony Award (252). The play is about rigid and opinionated characters, which Simon makes fun of and by doing so, illustrates the idea that "successful relationships are built upon compromise and tolerance" (255). Two years later, Simon takes the same basic idea of what happens when two very different people live together and applies it to a new play entitled *The Odd Couple* (255). Only this time, he examines the possibility of what might happen if neither person compromises (255). He got the idea from Danny and the end result was a play that illustrated that "sometimes

behavioral patterns cannot be broken, and to fight them is to beg frustration" (255). This same year, Simon receives another Tony Award for Best Playwright (252).

In 1966 *The Star-Spangled Girl* is produced and unsuccessful (256). He wins the Sam S. Shubert Award for 1967-1968 (252) and then produces *Plaza Suite* followed by *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* in 1969 (256). These last two plays are more philosophical as compared to Simon's previous works yet they still contain his comic relief (256). Following his new trend, he writes *The Gingerbread Lady*, which is "according to Edyth McGovern 'essentially a drama rather than a comedy'" (257). The play depicts a recovering alcoholic who falls weak and returns to her old habits (257).

| [Top](#) | The years from 1971 to 1977 were very productive for Simon, beginning with *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, which "shows Simon's deep concern for the growing indifference in modern society" (258). Next came *The Sunshine Boys*, a comedy that is said to be one of Simon's personal favorites from his own work (258). *The Good Doctor* arrived in 1973 and "satisfie[d] Simon's desire to show people how absurdly they live their lives" (258). The play is made up of a series of sketches derived from Anton Chekov's short stories (258) and has twenty-six characters that are played by just three men and two women (259). *God's Favorite* was produced in 1974 and is a comedy based on the Biblical story of Job (259). In the play, Simon tries to "'justify the ways of God to men'" yet even he admits it "'was simply not done skillfully enough'" (259). Two years later he wrote *California Suite* and then another autobiographical play called *Chapter Two* in 1977 (259). *Chapter Two* is about Simon's healing time after the death of his first wife in 1973 and his next marriage to Marsha Mason that same year (260). The play may be considered his best because it contains "a fine balance of sadness and delight, of despair and hope" (260).

The 1980's also proved to be productive years for Simon, beginning with *I Ought to Be in Pictures* in 1980 about a nineteen-year old girl who tries to make a relationship with the father who had left her mother when she was a little girl (261). Next he wrote an autobiographical trilogy beginning with *Brighton Beach Memoirs* about a Jewish family and their financial problems during the Depression (Peacock 374). The play received great reviews and gave way to *Biloxi Blues*, which follows the main character, Eugene from *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, as he joins the Army and undergoes the ten weeks of basic training in Biloxi, Mississippi (375). The plot is very similar to Simon's own experiences in the military when he was a young man in college (375). The final part of the trilogy is *Broadway Bound* and is about how Eugene and his older brother "become comedy writers, leave home, and take jobs with a major network radio show" (375). Also during the 1980's, Simon had divorced Marsha and remarried to a woman named Diana Lander (369). The two may have had a rocky relationship since they were divorced seven years after their wedding in 1980 and then married again two years later in 1990 and then divorced again in 1998 (369). Yet with his third wife, he adopted a third child named Bryn (369).

Simon's next project was a comedy called *Rumors* and it was followed by *Lost in Yonkers* (376). The latter won him a Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a Tony Award for Best Drama in 1991 (376). The play tells the story about "a dysfunctional Jewish-American family during World War II" (376). *Lost in Yonkers* was followed by another comedy, *Jake's Women*, but both it and *Rumors* were seen as "too lightweight after the successes of his autobiographical plays and *Lost in Yonkers*" (376).

Besides plays, Simon also wrote many films (377), and books (Geitner 253), which were mostly adaptations of his plays like *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple* (Peacock 377). He wrote two original screenplays entitled *Murder by Death* and *The Goodbye Girl*. His movies received mixed reviews (377) and some received Writers Guild Awards for Best Screenplay (Geitner 252). Yet Simon soon began to feel "'disenchantment with Hollywood'" (Peacock 377) because he felt he had too many people to please (377). Yet with his plays, he can write for himself and only has to please the director (377). He has explained "'writing is an escape from a world that crowds me'" (377) and that "'When I get an idea for a play I see the whole thing immediately- that first day'" (Moritz 362). His next step is to go to the typewriter where he follows a formula: he develops characters first, and then the plot comes along and he is sure to give every scene a conflict (362).

The formula must work for Simon (a member of the Dramatists Guild and Writers Guild of America (Peacock 369)), for he has been called "'America's foremost stage comedist'" (378) and "'one of the finest writers of comedy in American literary history'" (378). Although he has been "accused of sacrificing meaning and depth to a good joke" (Geitner 253), Simon believes that life includes the funny and sad and that "drama as a reflection of life" should do the same (253). He sees there is a connection between "pain and laughter" (254). He states that his "'idea of the ultimate achievement in a comedy is to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out'" (254).

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