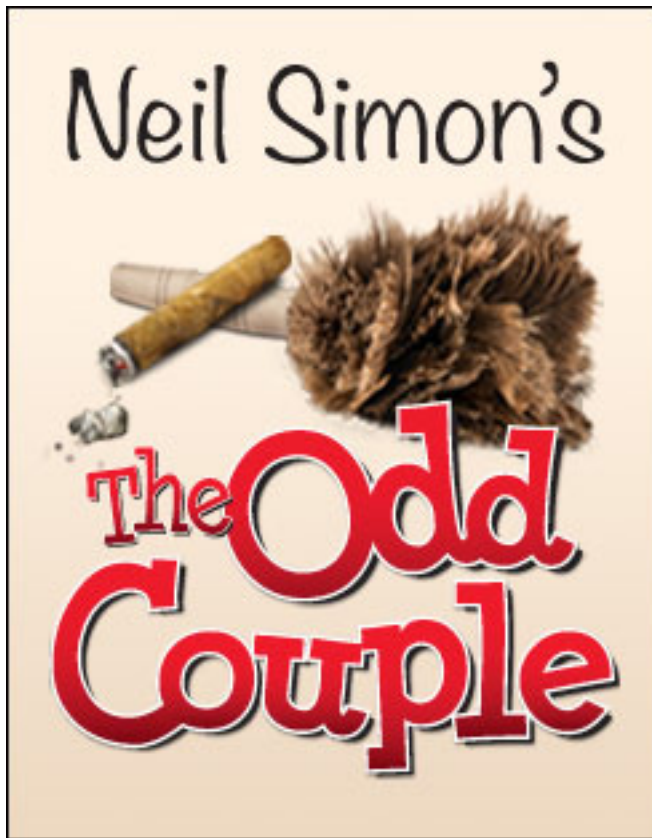


JEWEL THEATRE AUDIENCE GUIDE



directed by Stephen Muterspaugh

WRITING THE PLAY

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WRITING *THE ODD COUPLE*

FELIX

This is the last time I ever cook for you. Because people like you don't even appreciate a decent meal. That's why they have T.V. dinners.

WRITING *THE ODD COUPLE*: ORIGINS

While Neil Simon was still a teenager, he and Danny, his older brother by eight and a half years, began collaborating on comedy material that they sold to stand-up comics and radio announcers. During the summers of 1952 and 1953, they wrote sketches for a professional acting company at Camp Tamiment, a summer resort in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania. His first summer there, Danny met a beautiful young woman named Arlene Friedman. Neil describes her in *Rewrites* (1996), the first book of his two-tome memoir, as “a philosophy wizard who would rather sing than go to Harvard”. Danny and Arlene married that winter, and the following summer Arlene returned to Tamiment as part of the entertainment staff. They soon had two children: Michael, born in 1956 and Valerie, born in 1959. In 1956, after a great deal of success as a comedy-writing team, Danny and Neil went their separate ways professionally. Danny bought a house in Encino, California and had a lucrative career as a head writer on top television shows and a TV director. His marriage was not as successful—after nine years, the couple had a painful breakup. Neither Danny nor Arlene remarried. Neil observed in *Rewrites*, “my personal feeling was that he carried a torch for her that eventually dimmed, but it was years before it ever burned out”.

His devotion to his ex-wife was not the only similarity between Danny and Felix in *The Odd Couple*. At the same time he broke up with Arlene, his good friend Roy Gerber, a theatrical agent, broke up with his wife, Connie. To cut down on rent, utilities and other expenses, and because both had alimony and child support to pay, Danny proposed that he move into Roy's West Hollywood home.

The parallels to the play don't end there. As Neil wrote, "Danny was the cook and Roy was the husband who usually came home late for dinner ... They generally ate at home together, even on double dates with women ... When Danny made his pot roast for four (he was an excellent cook), and the girls showed up an hour late because Roy never told them exactly when to arrive, Danny almost killed Roy with his spatula" (*Rewrites*).

Bill Gerber, Roy's son, filled in the details, "My dad was late, and it got dry, and Danny never forgave him". The next day, his father told Simon, "Sweetheart, that was a lovely dinner last night. What are we going to have tonight?" Simon replied, "What do you mean, cook you dinner? You never take me out to dinner. You never bring me flowers."



From left, Roy Gerber, Danny Simon, Neil Simon and TV odd couple Jack Klugman and Tony Randall, 1993

"It was like God put the idea in my head," Danny recalled in a 1983 interview with *People* magazine. "A play about two divorced guys who move in together and have the same problems they had when married. It was the best idea I ever had." He sat down to write it but couldn't get further than 15 pages. As Danny explains it, he was incapacitated by such low self-esteem after his marriage broke up that he didn't have it in him to finish.

Neil had another perspective: "Danny never wrote alone, starting with his collaboration with me, through all his years working with other writers on TV ... For months he tried to put the play on paper ... I kept calling him from New York, urging him to continue. I thought the idea couldn't miss. Try as he might, he gave up on it. 'You know how to write plays. I don't. You write it instead'" (*Rewrites*).

Until *The Odd Couple*, the jury was still out on Neil Simon as a playwright. He had a good run with his first play and his second, *Barefoot in the Park*, though a huge success, didn't get him past "flash-in-the-pan" status. *The Odd Couple* was the play that established his career.

In the front of the original published version of the play, Neil wrote, "Thank you Roy and Danny for the use of your lives."

Roy Gerber's daughter Pam told the *Dallas Voice* in a 2015 interview that her father loved the play. "It immortalized him." Danny had a different take. Neil arranged for Danny to receive an author's share of a sixth of the play's income in perpetuity, but left him out of the acknowledgements. It caused a decade-long rift, which was at least partially mended when Danny saw *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. In Neil's autobiographical play, the protagonist is separated as a boy from his much-loved older brother, which devastates him. Danny told *People* that he cried and laughed from the moment the curtain went up. "I was touched by Doc's hidden feelings toward me," he said. "The floodgates opened." (Doc was the nickname Danny gave Neil when he was a little boy. Neil had a play doctor's kit and would listen to people's heartbeats with his toy stethoscope.)

When Danny died on July 26, 2005, Neil wrote the *New York Times*, "Danny made me laugh. He made everyone laugh. He was a character (in more ways than one) in at least 9 or 10 of my plays, and I'm sure will probably be there again in many plays to come." Indeed, as Danny often joked, "There have been more plays written about me than about Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc and Julius Caesar all put together".

OSCAR

Not in other words. Those are the perfect ones.

WRITING THE ODD COUPLE: COMEDY

Contrary to the heading, Neil Simon did not consider himself a writer of comedy per se. In his 2010 article for *The New Yorker*, "Master of Revels", John Lahr wrote, "Simon has always felt that every play he writes is a drama with 'comic moments.' He doesn't write jokes or particularly like telling them".

In the second book of his memoirs, *The Play Goes On* (1999), Simon described his formula of combining comedy with the drama of "everyday people faced with serious dilemmas", which "was confounding and somewhat annoying to many critics". Early on, he was even cautioned by the playwright Lillian Hellman not to mix comedy with drama. Neither the critics nor Hellman found his "hybrid form of play" acceptable. Serious comedies or funny dramas were atypical for most playwrights at the time—either your work was strictly comedy like George S. Kaufman or you wrote drama/tragedies like Eugene O'Neill. Some playwrights blurred the line: Simon cites Samuel Beckett, who "wrote poignant humor laden with the sense of anguish and loss", as well as Eugene Ionesco, whose "abstract farces" were laced with "strong social overtones" and Tennessee Williams, who "wrote poetic tragedies that managed to have a great deal of ironic humor". Simon called them "the greats I wanted to emulate," but "the problem was that I wanted to emulate them all at the same time, and often in the same play".

Despite the critics panning him for being "neither true to the comedy nor true to the drama," Simon was confident that "what was most poignant was often most funny". He reasoned "If it's mixed in life, why can't you do it in a play?" (*Rewrites*).

Audiences overwhelmingly agreed. Nevertheless, when he was writing *The Odd Couple*, Simon fell victim to "the insecurity of the writer ... an ever-constant battle" (*Rewrites*). He feared that his "grim, dark play about two lonely men ... would probably be the end of my career."

Instead, it was the “breakthrough play I was hoping for,” and considered now to be his masterpiece

Simon’s years of writing comedy for radio and TV helped him to develop structure and character. Hellman aside, he was given very good advice along the way. After three years of writing and rewriting it, he showed his first play, *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961) to his agent Helen Harvey, who promptly handed it to Herman Shumlin, a 25-year veteran of the theatre, and one of Broadway’s most important and respected directors. Although Shumlin ended up passing on it, he helped the budding playwright reshape his play, which Shumlin felt had no construction. He told Simon that it was “very funny dialogue broken up by scene changes,” but not yet a viable play (*Rewrites*). He also taught Neil that each character in a comedy had to be likeable, “because if we don’t like him, we don’t root for him. This is a family comedy ... let’s have the audience like our family and take them to our hearts” (*Rewrites*). Simon applied Shumlin’s advice from then on, and wrote characters that people not only liked, but identified with. To this day, he often notices audiences sighing in recognition at certain lines in his plays. “You’d hear an ‘aah’ from the audience, a sound of ‘My God, that’s me. That’s me, that’s you, that’s Uncle Joe, that’s Pop.’” (“Master of Revels”).

Simon observed, “When people care, even the slightest joke will get a big laugh, for they’ll be so caught up in what’s going on. If they *don’t* care and are *not* caught up, you need blockbusters every two minutes and even that won’t fulfill an audience” (“Playboy Interview: Neil Simon”, 1979).

Another director who had a long-lasting influence on Simon was Mike Nichols. Saint Subber, who produced several of Neil’s plays, including *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), *The Odd Couple*, *Plaza Suite* (1969) and *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* (1971), suggested that Nichols direct *Barefoot in the Park*. At first skeptical—at this point in his career, Nichols was a comic and hadn’t directed anything—Neil realized Nichols would elevate his humor and bring a sophistication to it that he lacked. Nichols did that and more. Simon recalls how Nichols wouldn’t let the play veer towards getting laughs, instead admonishing the actors, “Who told you this is a comedy? We’re doing *King Lear* here.” Doing it “with the intensity of *Lear*,” Simon remarked, “is exactly what made it so funny”

(*Rewrites*). There were very few laughs during rehearsals, as the actors were too busy being involved with the characters they inhabited. Nichols had guided the play “from artifice to believability”, to the degree that Simon felt like he was “eavesdropping”—watching something “too intimate and “too private”.

There’s no mistaking that Nichols’ approach informed *The Odd Couple*, which he directed for Simon after *Barefoot in the Park*. He guided him through the rewrites (Act III had many) and helped mold and shape it, all the while honoring Neil’s benchmark of “drama with comic moments”. With *The Odd Couple* more than any other Simon play, comedy resides in character. “His laughs are character laughs: they emerge from the distilled reality of personality” (“Master of Revels”).

It takes a certain kind of actor to deliver Simon’s character-driven form of comic drama. When casting his play, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, Simon recalls, “I was not looking for a comic in this fairly dark comedy I had written, but a pure actor” (*Rewrites*). He used Peter Falk, whose work until then had not involved comedy, and Lee Grant, a Method actor who performed in plays by the likes of Jean Benet and Anton Chekov. “Once again, the basic rule of comedy was proven. Never try to make comedy funny. Honesty will do nicely, thank you”. Honesty is real, and as Simon once told his ex-wife Diane Lander, “Real is the essential ingredient in humor. If the words are funny, you don’t have to say them funny” (*Rewrites*).

Simon also received early career guidance from Max Gordon, a highly respected producer, and like Herman Shumlin, from the old school. After reading *Come Blow Your Horn*, he told Neil, “A play is like a house. It has to be built on solid foundation”. Gordon warned him of the consequences: “Once the curtain goes up, your play is going to sink right into the sand”. Gordon also echoed Shumlin’s advice about character when he advised Neil, “There’s no play without characters. First you get your characters, then you get your story, then you get your dialogue”.

At the time he was writing *The Odd Couple*, all plays had three acts, but Simon had never written more than 17 pages at a time for his radio and television skits. For days, he agonized over how to triangulate his

concept of the play, give it a base, and fill the three-act structure. While at the beach with his young family, he told his wife Joan that he was going to take a walk along the shore. He was determined to figure out the form for the play, and by the time he returned, he meant to have it. "As my feet sank into the wet sand," he recounted, "I kept remembering what Max Gordon said: 'Characters. Structure. What you got here is a house that's going to sink in the sand.'" When he returned 2-1/2 hours later, "sunburned to a crisp," he enthusiastically announced to Joan that he had figured out the play's form: "The first act begins with a poker game, the second act begins with a poker game and the third act *ends* with the poker game." To assuage her skepticism, he explained, "I know it doesn't sound like anything, but I have a place now, a setting to root it in. I know what the apartment looks like, what it smells like ... I know where the doors are, where the kitchen is, I know how they dress. I know who the other poker players are, what they do for a living, and how much this game means to them" (*Rewrites*).

Once his form was established, Simon brought in another element that would become a hallmark for his writing style: the anchor. "I always have to find the anchor. I have to find the Greek chorus in the play, the character who either literally talks to the audience or talks to the audience in a sense ... Oscar in *The Odd Couple* is the Greek chorus. He watches, he perceives how Felix behaves, and he comments on it. Felix then comments back on what Oscar is, but Oscar is the one who is telling us what the play is about" ("Neil Simon: The Art of Theater No. 10").

Hand-in-hand with the anchor is the construction of the comic line, which Simon executes masterfully in *The Odd Couple*. His brother Danny helped with that: "The punch line is not what makes the joke, it's the straight line. What you have to have is a great straight line—completely natural, what the character would say—then your obligation is to find the joke within that line" ("Master of Revels").

Observing behavior, and then dissecting its whys and wherefores is another Neil Simon building block. "The good mechanic knows how to take a car apart," Simon told James Lipton in 1979 for *The Paris Review*. "I love to take the human mind apart and see how it works." This not only informs the content of his plays, but also how he names them. To give a play a title, Simon taps into how our brains latch onto the

recognizable. He called the play *The Odd Couple* not just because the characters “certainly were one, but because I favored titles that were already part of the language, which automatically made them sound familiar and easy to remember ... I think now when people see those words strung together in a newspaper or a book, they tend to think of the play or the film or more likely the television series more than they would think of the phrase that was in use far before I ever thought of using it” (*Rewrites*).

Simon used a similar psychology of word association when he gave Felix a “prissy” name that “sounded like a cartoon character, a shy and finicky person”. He gave Oscar a name with a hard *K* sound so that the audience would “visualize a stronger person, more dominating” (*Rewrites*).

Another example of Simon’s understanding of the mind of the audience is his deliberate omission of the wives of the characters. Simon reasoned that if he had shown the wives, “they would have come out as shrews, berating their husbands for their behavior, and the audience would feel the men were well out of it. On the other hand, if I made the women quite sympathetic, we might have lost some empathetic feelings for Oscar and Felix” (*Rewrites*). He left them as offstage characters, open to the audience’s interpretation and imagination.

The tool that Simon wields most expertly in constructing his comic drama is the friction between opposites, which is at the heart of *The Odd Couple*. Simon considers dilemma “the key word” in writing character-driven comedy. “It is always a dilemma, not a situation” (“Master of Revels”). As the dilemma increases, the stakes become higher and the behavior more extreme. In *Broadway Bound* (1986), Stan (modeled on Danny) is trying to teach Eugene (modeled on himself) how to write comedy. He presses his younger brother to name the most critical component of comedy. When Eugene can’t answer, Stan says, “Conflict!” Stan then asks for the other key element, and all Eugene can think of is, “More conflict?” Stan tells him, “The key word is wants. In every comedy, even drama, somebody has to want something and want it bad. When somebody tries to stop him—that’s conflict” (*Broadway Bound*).

“By the time you know the conflicts,” Simon explains, “the play is already written in your mind. All you have to do is put the words down.

You don't have to outline the play, it outlines itself. You go by sequential activity. One thing follows the other. But it all starts with that first seed, conflict" ("Neil Simon: The Art of Theater No. 10").

Simon goes on: "As Stan says, it's got to be a very, very strong conflict, not one that allows the characters to say, Forget about this! I'm walking out. They've got to stay there and fight it out to the end" ("Neil Simon: The Art of Theater No. 10"). Oscar and Felix have that level of investment in the outcome, with both of them fighting for acceptance and recognition, fearful of losing yet another relationship, neither wanting to be alone. It is the distinction that separates *The Odd Couple* from the overused trope of the buddy play.

Once he found his structure, Simon had no trouble with the first act—he enjoyed the occasional poker game with friends, writers, agents and actors. "I knew the atmosphere, the talk, the drinks, the smoke and the food ... I loved the banter, the jokes and the sandwiches from the Carnegie Deli. It was my night for male bonding, which came less frequently for me once I was married and had children" (*Rewrites*). All made its way into the play.

The second act came right from the pages of Roy Gerber's and Danny's post-divorce living situation, so it came easily too. The third act was a different story: a case study in rewriting, a practice that had been drilled into Neil over the years by Danny. When Simon finished writing the play, he sent it off to Mike Nichols, who was directing it, and Saint Stubbs, the producer. They were ecstatic, and set about securing the actors, designers, production team, and venues for its trial runs and Broadway debut. During the first reading of the play, it was obvious to Simon and his colleagues that they had a huge hit on their hands. However, "Two minutes into reading the third act," Simon recalls, "I realized how wrong I was. It was unimaginably bad" (*Rewrites*). Walter Matthau, who had been cast as Oscar, expressed second thoughts about doing the play, insisting it wasn't the third act he had been originally sent when he agreed to do it. He was right—Nichols had asked for changes, and Simon had rewritten to his satisfaction.

The saga of unsuccessful rewrites upon unsuccessful rewrites is chronicled in, aptly, Simon's book *Rewrites*. To make a long story shorter, it wasn't until days before the play left its trial run in Boston to

open in New York that Simon was able to write a version that would stick—and only then because he got unsolicited but immeasurably valuable help from Elliot Norton. Norton was the *Boston Herald's* theatre critic and had a television show on public station WGBH, where he hosted *Elliot Norton Reviews*. Norton was known as "The Dean of American Theatre Critics" for his "play doctoring," a style of theatre criticism where he made suggestions on how to improve a show. Boston was a major hub for tryouts of Broadway-bound plays, and Elliot's criticism was held in high regard by producers, directors and playwrights.

The headline of his review of *The Odd Couple's* first night in Boston was, "Oh, For a Third Act. What happened to 'Funniest First Two Acts Ever Seen?'" Elliot felt the play bottomed out in Act III but was enthused by the rest of it. Two days later he invited the two leads, as well as Nichols and Simon on his TV show, and asked if Neil intended to rewrite the third act. Norton told him that he had missed the Pigeon sisters: "They were so darned funny, and I wondered why you didn't bring them back". Simon said, "A lightbulb did not go on above my head. It was a two-mile-long neon sign" (*Rewrites*). He wrote the Pigeons into the third act, and after yet another rewrite, rushed it onto the stage. Although he'd rewrite some of the dialogue before it would move to Broadway in the next couple of days, the audience exploded with approval. Norton came to see it shortly before the play left Boston. He wrote a final glowing review of the newly-improved comedy, taking no credit for his contribution. He predicted it would be an enormous hit on the Great White Way. Neil said, "It never occurred to me that would be an understatement" (*Rewrites*).

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SPEED

I'll buy a book and I'll start to read again.

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