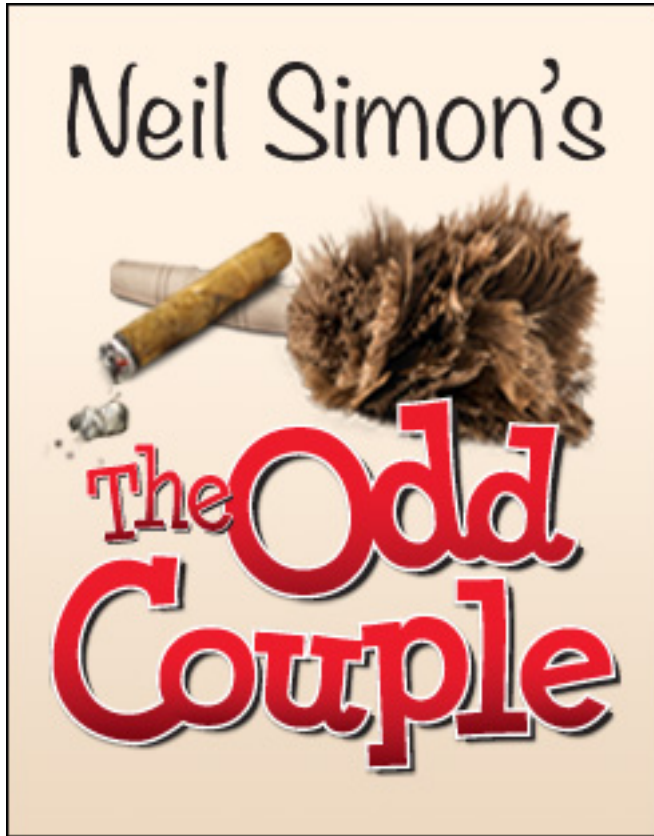


JEWEL THEATRE AUDIENCE GUIDE



directed by Stephen Muterspaugh

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

OSCAR

No sir, there's no doubt about it.
I'm the luckiest man on earth.

BIOGRAPHY OF NEIL SIMON

Marvin Neil Simon was born in the Bronx on July 4, 1927. His mother, Mamie, worked in Gimbel's department store. His father, Irving, was an



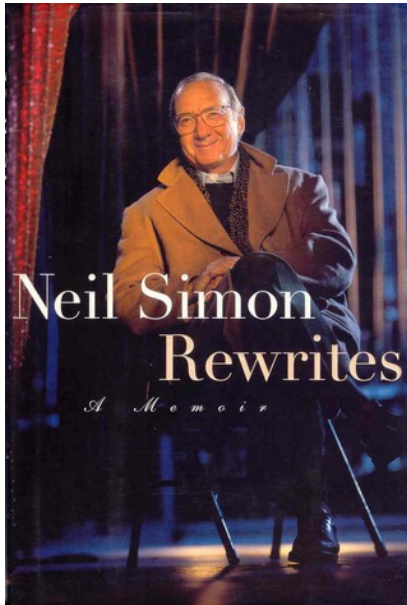
Neil in 1927

on-again, off-again salesman in Manhattan's garment district. A known playboy, Irving was also an on-again, off-again husband and father. Neil's only sibling was his brother Danny, 8-1/2 years his senior. Neil once told *Time* magazine, "My complicated relationship with Danny stems from the fact that when I was growing up, I saw him as my father. It wasn't until much later that I saw him as a brother. He'd tell me when to go to bed, how to behave, give me all the rules of life."

Before his death on July 26, 2005, Danny would become Neil's writing partner for radio in New York and television comedy in Los Angeles. When they parted ways in 1956—Neil wanted to write plays and return to New York—Danny directed television and was head writer for many successful comedies. In retirement, he lectured on comedy writing at the University of Southern California and Duke University and taught seminars all over the world.

The Simons moved to Washington Heights, in northern Manhattan, when Neil was a child. That's where Danny gave him the nickname "Doc", as he would pretend to be a doctor, listening to heartbeats with a play

stethoscope from his toy doctor's kit. The moniker stuck through much of Neil's thirties. Throughout Danny's lifetime (he died in 2005) it was the name he called his brother. In *Rewrites*, the first book of his two-tome autobiography, Neil wrote about an incident with his parents when



Cover of *Rewrites*

he was seven years old. Mamie was determined to catch Irving in the act of cheating in order to initiate divorce proceedings against him. She took Neil on a stakeout outside the apartment building of one of Irving's mistresses, telling him to look out for his father so he would be able to testify about his infidelity in court. Neil was torn between his love and loyalty to both parents and retreated into himself. He returned to this practice over the years to insulate himself from the pain of his unhappy childhood. He also used movies to avoid his unfortunate home life. In his book, he wrote in the third person how "Charlie Chaplain will give him ninety minutes of respite, and laughter is the only escape". Clearly, it was effective—according to several sources, he was "often thrown out of movie theaters for laughing too loudly".

Soon after the surveillance incident, Irving disappeared for many months, returned, then left again for another few months. It was a cycle he would repeat seven more times while Neil grew up. Each time he went, Irving left the family penniless and to fend for themselves. Mamie took in boarders in order to keep Danny from dropping out of school to support the family.

The parents eventually divorced, and Neil went to live with relatives in Queens. He attended DeWitt Clinton High School, where he was sometimes ostracized for being Jewish, an experience that would later inform his work.



Danny and Neil in 1984

quick wit and an active imagination, traits he shared with his brother.

The pair continuously fabricated jokes to guard themselves against the painful absence of their father. When Danny started to experiment with writing comedy, he tried out his lines on his little brother, asking him to be his sounding board and seeking his input. He said years later that Neil would be doing his homework in the evening, and he'd ask him to "just sit there and talk to me. And he would come up with these funny lines, just like he always had." While Neil was still a teenager, he and Danny began collaborating on comedy material that they sold to stand-up comics and radio announcers.

Neil graduated from high school in 1944 at the age of sixteen. He joined the US Army Air Force Reserve at 17 and entered New York University under their GI program. Throughout his military career, Neil would write for many military newspapers. Danny remained a huge influence, encouraging him to pursue writing while he served.

Discharged in 1946, Neil took a job in the mail room at Warner Brothers in New York, where Danny worked in the publicity department. The brothers were soon writing for radio humorist Goodman Ace of CBS, who hired them after they regaled him with a line about a witless movie usher explaining a film plot: "Joan Crawford's boyfriend is sent to the electric chair—and she promises to wait for him." They would provide material for many popular radio comedians, and their style of rapid-fire absurdity secured them work in the early days of television. Over the next decade, the Simons wrote for Tallulah Bankhead, Milton Berle, Jackie Gleason, Red Buttons, Phil Silvers and, most memorably, Sid Caesar on "Your Show of Shows," which Neil later fictionalized in his 1993 play, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.



Neil writing at his Olympia SM9 typewriter

During the summers of 1952 and 1953, Danny and Neil wrote sketches for a professional acting company at Camp Tamiment, a summer resort in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. The first year, he developed a crush on Joan Baim, a young counselor at the

children's camp adjacent to Tamiment. She was engaged to be married that winter, so he'd watch her from afar but was never formally introduced. The following year, they were both back at the camp, and he learned she had broken off her engagement. After a three-month courtship, the couple married on September 30, 1953.



Neil and Joan, 1971

In 1956, when Danny Simon moved to California to be a television director, Neil collaborated with William Friedberg and Will Glickman on a series of specials under the title *Max Leibman Presents*. In 1957, with Joan and four-month-old Ellen, he moved to Hollywood to write for Jerry Lewis. He also adapted several plays for television. By the later 1950's, wanting more independence and control than television writing afforded him, and homesick for New York (he and Joan did not like living in California) he started writing a full-length play of his own, *Come Blow Your Horn*.

Four years later, their first daughter Ellen was born, and her sister Nancy followed in 1963.



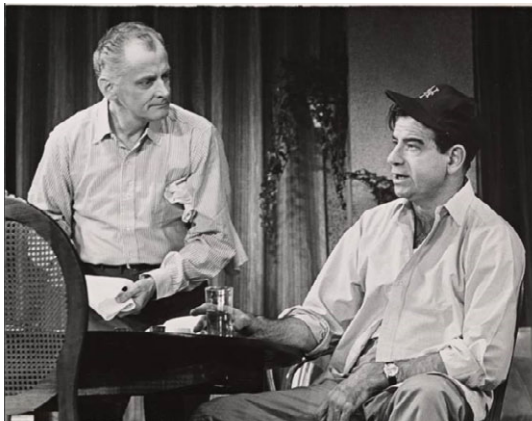
Ellen, Neil and Nancy, 1966

"When its 100 degrees in New York, it's 72 in Los Angeles. When its 30 degrees in New York, in Los Angeles it's still 72. However, there are 6 million interesting people in New York, and only 72 in Los Angeles."

Neil Simon

For three years, he wrote and revised it, and after a trial run in Pennsylvania at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, it opened on February 22, 1961 at Broadway's Brooks Atkinson Theater. It ran for 677 performances. His second play, *Barefoot in the Park*, based on his and Joan's life as newlyweds in a cramped fifth-floor walk-up, also premiered at the Biltmore after a trial run at the Bucks County Playhouse. It opened on October 23, 1963 and was an enormous success, running for 1,530 performances. He sold the film rights to it for \$300,000, the equivalent of nearly \$2,500,000 today, and wrote the screenplay. The movie was as big a hit as the play.

In 1965, Simon had a second smash hit with *The Odd Couple*, which ran for two years on Broadway and earned him his first Tony Award for best original play. It spawned a 1968 film and a television series in the 1970s, as well as several other derivative works and spin-offs, described in the Production History section.



Art Carney and Walter Matthau in the original *Odd Couple*, 1965

In 1972, Simon's wife, Joan, was diagnosed with bone cancer and after fifteen months, she passed away at the age of 41. Ellen was 16 and Nancy just 10. After twenty years of happy marriage, the loss affected Neil deeply. Later that year, Neil met actress Marsha Mason. Twenty-two days after they met, Neil and Marsha married.



Marsha Mason and Neil Simon in 1977

Marsha Mason gave up acting for three years during a critical time in her career to focus all her attention on the still-grieving Neil and his daughters, a sacrifice Neil called in *Rewrites*, "momentous" and "an incredible gesture" for which "she has my love and respect forever". Although the marriage ended after

nine years, the couple remained friends and would work professionally again.

Simon's subsequent playwriting in the 1970s would develop in a different direction, taking on serious and often personal themes and storylines. He told the story of a married man working through a mid-life crisis with a series of affairs in *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*. *The Gingerbread Lady* looked at the struggle of a once-famous singer trying to make a comeback after destroying her career with alcohol. *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* viewed the nervous breakdown of a recently fired business executive.

Simon would continue to create characters who used humor to cope with difficult situations, his own defense mechanism since childhood. His work began to reveal more of his personal demons, like the dysfunctional family of his childhood and the difficulty of coping with Joan's tragic illness and death. During this period of turning inward, he wrote *The Sunshine Boys*, *The Good Doctor*, *California Suite*, and *Chapter Two*. In the latter, a widower battles guilt over falling in love and remarrying, as Neil had with Marsha Mason. He also wrote several screenplays, including *The Goodbye Girl*, which received an Academy Award nomination in 1977.

The 1980s saw his work become even more personal with his trio of semi-autobiographical plays. The first, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, tells the story of a middle-class Jewish American teenager growing up in a troubled family. The boy comes of age in *Biloxi Blues*, where in the Army, he must confront anti-Semitism. In the last of the trio, *Broadway Bound*, the boy, now a young adult and struggling writer, develops the maturity and perspective to gain more understanding of his parents' marital problems. Simon would maintain later that writing the play helped him address his own problems with his mother.

Simon was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame in 1983. In the same year, the Alvin Theatre was renamed the Neil Simon Theatre in his honor, making him the only living playwright to have a New York theatre named after him.

The first time Simon's marriage to Diane Lander broke up—they married for a year and a half in 1987, then remarried in 1990 for eight years—



Simon and Diane Landers' second wedding, 1990

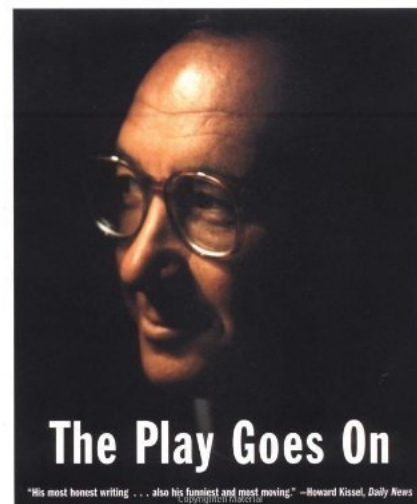
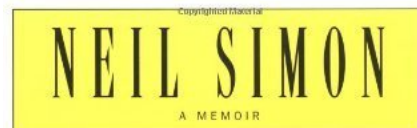
he wrote *Jake's Women*. The titular male protagonist, a thinly-disguised version of himself, faces his "ghosts", the good and bad experiences of his two earlier marriages, and examines their impact on his third.

Lost in Yonkers, a painfully funny story about the effect an abusive mother has on her grown children, was his first offering of the 1990s. The play was a success, and in 1991 it earned the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Simon wrote *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* in 1993, a behind-the-scenes look into the writers' room, as a comedy-writing team shout out one-liners, each trying to top the other. Neil based it on his stint with Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" in the 1950s. Simon received Kennedy Center honors in 1995 for his contribution to the arts and to popular culture in the twentieth century. When presenting him with the award, President Clinton said, "He challenges us and himself never to take ourselves too seriously. Thank you for the wit and the wisdom."

In 1996 Simon wrote the aforementioned *Rewrites*, which chronicled his life up to Joan's death. He followed it with *The Play Goes On* in 1999, which ends the year after his second divorce from Lander. He dedicated it "To Elaine Joyce, who turned my life around". Joyce and Simon married in September 1999 and remain married today.

In 1997, Simon introduced his first major African-American character in *Proposals*. In 1999, he rang the bell to open trading at the New York Stock Exchange as part of the Exchange's *Bridging the Millennium* program, which honored leaders of the twentieth century whose achievements continue to enrich humanity.



Cover of Simon's follow-up to Rewrites

In 2001, just about the same time his new play *45 Seconds from Broadway* debuted, Neil Simon received the first Sarah Applebaum Nederlander Award for Excellence in Theatre at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In 2003, he debuted *Rose's Dilemma*, as well as *Oscar and Felix: A New Look at the Odd Couple*, an updated rewrite of the original.

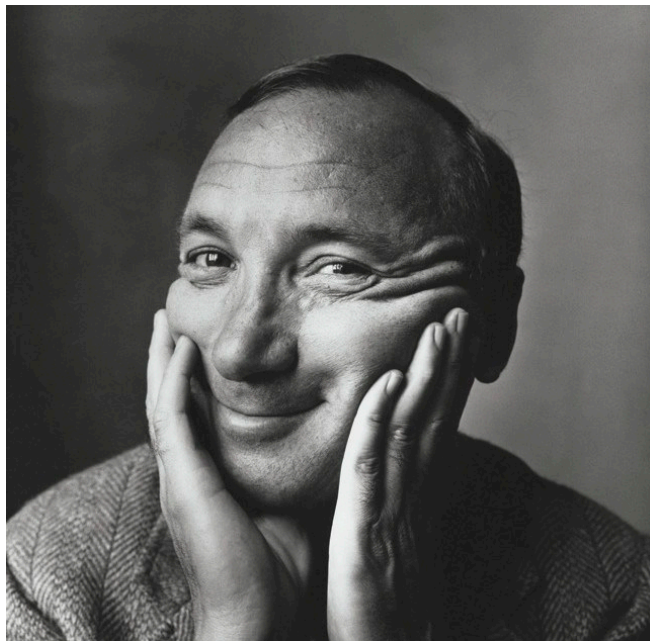
Neil Simon has written more than 30 plays and nearly the same number of movie screenplays, mostly adaptations of his plays. He has received more combined Oscar and Tony nominations than any other writer.



Elaine Joyce and Neil Simon, 2007

During the 1966 theatre season, he had four hit plays running on Broadway at the same time: *The Odd Couple*, *Barefoot in the Park*, *Sweet Charity* and *The Star-Spangled Girl*. It is a record that has remained unbroken to this day. His prodigious output of work over nearly six decades has

earned Neil Simon an exalted position in the history of American theater.



Neil Simon, in a 1990 portrait by Irving Penn

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SPEED

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

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