

Neil Simon

by Gerard Raymond

“The best days I ever had,” is how Neil Simon remembers 1953. He had just turned 26, he got married, and he started working as a gag writer for Sid Caesar’s celebrated live-television comedy program *Your Show of Shows*. His career as America’s most successful playwright, however, was still ahead of him. Those salad days during the golden age of television are the subject of his new play, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, currently playing at the Doolittle Theater in Los Angeles.

In *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, eight New York comedy writers — holed up together in a single room of a Manhattan high-rise building — frenetically try to outdo each other as they concoct skits for their boss, Max Prince, the reigning king of television comedy. Based on Sid Caesar, Prince is a neurotic whirlwind of egotism, paranoia, compassion, and comic brilliance. Raging titanicly at the stupidity of the network, punching holes into the wall whenever he is outraged by the injustices of America, Max Prince presides over this bunch of crazy writers who seem to spend more time eating and wisecracking than working. But they provide the mercurial comedian with the fuel to unleash his genius on the air.

“I wanted to write about what it was like in that Writers’ Room for us in that particular time and era. And what it was like to work with a man like Sid Caesar, who was an absolute genius in terms of his comedy, and who at the same time was so troubled,” Simon explains. Churning out 39 live hour-and-a-half shows a year would be unthinkable today. The strain of this punishing schedule, along with pressure from the NBC brass to make the show more commercial, and the looming threat of McCarthyism, became so taxing that Caesar started taking tranquilizers



and chasing them down with booze. Simon reports, “It would disorient him a great deal, but strangely enough, never when he worked. He would come in not being able to remember at all what happened the night before, but when we worked he was right there in top form.”

The name Neil Simon today is almost synonymous with American comedy. His Broadway career was established with the 1963 hit *Barefoot in the Park*. *The Odd Couple*, his 1965 comedy, won him his first Tony Award and became one of the most popular television series of all time. Over the next two decades a string of hits,



Top: Neil Simon. Above: Alan Blumenfeld and Howard Hesseman in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.

including *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *Plaza Suite*, and *California Suite*, were enthusiastically received by audiences across the country, but the critics were grudging with their praise. However, with the advent of the 1983 *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and its sequels — Tony Award-winner *Biloxi Blues* and *Broadway Bound* — and *Lost in Yonkers* (the Pulitzer Prize winner of 1991), the critical establishment too began to acclaim the prolific play-

CAROL ROSEGG



Neil Simon's *Jake's Women* starring Helen Shaver and Alan Alda.

wright who turns 68 this July.

Marvin Neil Simon was born in the Bronx, New York and raised in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. His father, a Jewish garment salesman, periodically abandoned the family, leaving his mother to support her sons by working in a department store and organizing poker games. Simon credits his elder brother Danny with encouraging him to exploit his innate comic talents. "You don't make a decision to become a funny writer. You are either funny or you are not funny. Danny recognized a good sense of humor in me because of the comments I would make around the house. He would say to me, 'I think one day you are going to make a great comedy writer.'"

Together with Danny, Simon started selling material to stand-up comics and radio shows when he was a teenager. Then came his work for Sid Caesar on *Your Show of Shows* and its successor program *Caesar's Hour*. "Before I ever got on the show, I was an enormous fan and I watched it almost religiously," Simon recalls. "So when my brother and I finally got hired to be on the show, it was more or less a dream come true." In *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, Simon's stand-in, the novice writer Lucas, who provides the narration, observes the crazy stable of writers around Max Prince and gradually becomes part of the team.

Before writing the play Simon asked Sid

Caesar for his permission to write about that heady period in the years 1953 and 1954 when they worked together. "Sid said terrific, but I told him that I could not leave out the problems he went through because I thought it was very important for the truth of the story and for the miraculous recovery he made later on. I wanted to show the audience where he came from originally, and why he was under such pressure. He said, 'It's the truth. I trust you, write the way you feel it is.' When I finished the first draft I sent it to him for his okay and he said, 'I love it, just keep going.'"

Unlike Simon's other plays, notably *Chapter Two* or the *Brighton Beach* trilogy in which the comic voice is usually his own, Simon strove to keep the focus away from himself in *Laughter*. Significantly, his brother Danny doesn't appear in the play at all. Simon explored his relationship with his brother in his first play *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961) and the *Brighton Beach* trilogy, but in this instance he says he wished to keep the comedy show in the forefront. The other characters portrayed in *Laughter* are inspired by Simon's colleagues, who included Larry Gelbart, Mel Brooks, and Mel Tolkin — comic talents who are still considered the greatest in the field.

"*Laughter on the 23rd Floor* was enormous fun to write, but it was also very difficult because I had to capture about

eight different kinds of humor — eight different personalities whose humor came from different places, their psyches or whatever causes someone to be funny." For instance, in order to "get inside the maniacal and hysterical sense of humor" of the character based on Mel Brooks, Simon explains that he had to "really reach up and go to a different place in [his] mind."

Long regarded as the master of the one-liner, Simon in his current play examines the art and craft of comedy writing. Usually, Simon points out, the characters in his plays are funny without intending to be humorous. "Some of these people are bright and witty and are able to say humorous remarks, but not all of the remarks are intended to be funny they just come out that way." However, the roomful of comic geniuses in *Laughter*, all vying for attention from the Sid Caesar character, are consciously, and incessantly making jokes. "Everything was a funny line, whether we were writing or just sitting around talking about the world's activity. That's the way we talked, because there was a great competition going on between everybody in that room. Everyone wanted to be funny, everyone wanted to sit at the foot of the king."

Laughter, Simon's 27th play, also differs from most of Simon's previous plays in that it deals with politics. 1953 was one of the best years of Simon's life, but it also was one of the more shameful periods of American history — the time when Senator Eugene McCarthy conducted his infamous anti-Communist witch-hunts in the entertainment industry. "There was a great deal of fear, and it played a very important part in our own lives," says Simon. "McCarthy was such a — I don't know what word to use — lunatic would be a fair word. But he was so ambitious, and the threat that he held over anybody in public life was very nerve-racking for all of us because you didn't have to be a Communist or even be slightly Left. He would easily put somebody down that he didn't like, or if he got word about somebody, he would put them on the blacklist, and they wouldn't work again. It never happened to anybody that worked on that show, but it happened to a lot of other friends of mine."

Although the political dangers of the McCarthy era pose a very real threat to the men and women in the Writers' Room, they cope with it by making jokes about it. "As I remember," Simon says, "when we would talk about it, one person in the room would suddenly be very serious about McCarthy and then somebody

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else would just say something hysterically funny about it. That was living in our own world. I guess it is not unlike a team of baseball players in their locker room. They talk about baseball for a while, the tragedy comes in about injury and losses and things like that, and then the humor comes in."

In the past, much of the criticism against Simon was that his plays weren't serious enough. It is only after *Brighton Beach Memoirs* that critics took note of the serious themes underlying his new work. Simon argues that the serious elements were there much earlier than most people think, citing the 1968 *Plaza Suite* as an example. "The first act of that play, which was about the break-up of a marriage that was very painful to the two people who were going through it, was a very important turning point for me. Although the biggest hits I have had have been the out-and-out comedies — they are the ones that are most read and talked about — the plays that mean a lot to me are the ones that have a serious content to it. I can't write a play now that doesn't have a serious subtext, one which is strictly dramatic and in which the comedy just ebbs and flows throughout."

"The things that I like to write about most," Simon continues, "are how people generally screw up their lives. People who have a tragedy happen to them from outside sources — like being in a car crash or whatever — is one kind of story, but the stories that I like to write about, and which I find happen much more often to people, are the ones where if they had taken a different road or made a different choice in their life, they wouldn't be in the trouble they sometimes get into."

Although a very private man himself, Simon has explored much of his life history in his plays. And not all of it has been about the fun periods of his life, unlike *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. The death of his first wife Joan Baim of cancer in 1973 was a severe blow which still seems to affect him. He has written about this loss in several plays, particularly in *Chapter Two* in 1978, which deals with a widower's guilt over marrying again. A few months after Baim's death, Simon married actress Marsha Mason, who starred in several of his plays and their movie adaptations. (Mason played the character based on herself in the 1979 film version of *Chapter Two*.) Mason and Simon were divorced in 1982, and Simon married Diane Lander, a former actress and model. Although that marriage broke up in 1988, Simon remarried Lander two years later.

Simon's relationships with the women in his life, including his therapists, formed the subject of one of his less successful plays, *Jake's Women* which opened on Broadway after several revisions in 1992.

"It is a way of me having a catharsis, of getting rid of or at least facing the problem," says Simon, acknowledging the therapeutic effect of his autobiographical plays. He points out that audiences have also been affected personally by plays like *Chapter Two*. "So many people who have lost a spouse or a child and found it difficult to go on with their lives have written to me. I think they just wanted to know that they weren't alone in their own grief. I like it when I write a play that has entertainment value and gives people some enlightenment about certain things in their lives that they find hard to deal with. But I didn't write it for that purpose. I wrote it mostly just to exorcise my own guilt and not knowing when to let go of the grief."

Currently Neil Simon has a new play running in New York. But the man who was described a few years ago as the "last Broadway playwright" has chosen to mount his work Off-Broadway instead of on Broadway. The new play *London Suite*, which shares the same format as the previous *Plaza Suite* and *California Suite*, is already a major commercial hit. Simon explains that he has abandoned Broadway, the venue of his remarkable three-decade career so far, for practical reasons. "It's just adjusting like the stock market does now and then." Long runs on Broadway today are almost impossible unless you have a megahit on your hands, whereas a prolonged Off-Broadway run can be very lucrative. "There is nothing wrong with being an Off-Broadway playwright, the really good playwrights that I admire are not looking to Broadway anymore," he adds.

Simon is already looking forward to his 29th play, in which he will once again return to the happiest time of his life. He describes the next play, titled *Proposals*, as "a sort of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, five love stories that go on at the same time." The stories are inspired by the period when he was courting his first wife Joan. The year, of course, is 1953. "Yes," he laughs, "my stomping ground." □

Gerard Raymond is a New York-based journalist who writes on theater and film. His work has appeared in Harper's Bazaar, TheaterWeek, The Washington Post, and The Village Voice.

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