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THE STAGE PLAYS OF NEIL SIMON: THE STRUGGLE FOR PERSONAL
POWER AS CONTEMPORARY COMEDY

City University of New York

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THE STAGE PLAYS OF NEIL SIMON:
THE STRUGGLE FOR PERSONAL POWER
AS CONTEMPORARY COMEDY

by

GEORGE KOVACS

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This study is dedicated to my grandmother, who never lived to see it.

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INTRODUCTION

Arguably, drama is conflict. This conflict is manifested in dramatic action as a struggle for power, a struggle for power of all kinds, from Oedipus' struggle for the power to know to Didi and Gogo's struggle for the power to comprehend. Neil Simon's original stage plays express the struggles for personal power (as opposed to political power, military power, etc.) that are most pertinent to contemporary life; the original stage plays of Neil Simon express these various struggles for personal power (i.e., parent/child, mate/mate, friend/friend, self/environment, self/self) as the essence of contemporary comedy. It is from his representations of these conflicts among, between and within individuals that Simon creates laughter and depicts the fundamental concerns of the segment of contemporary society of and for which he writes. Using a comprehensive analysis of the original stage plays of Neil Simon, buttressed by the contributions of some of the foremost comedy theorists, this study will examine the original stage plays of Neil Simon as expressions of the struggle for personal power in various manifestations, resulting in the creation of contemporary comedy.

Despite the fact that all of Simon's work may be shown to represent the struggle for power as contemporary comedy, this study will be limited to comprehensive consideration only of Simon's nonmusical stage comedies from Come Blow Your Horn to Chapter Two. And, given even these limitations, The Good Doctor will not be considered in this study, because, unlike all other of Simon's stage comedies,

it is not original but adapted from stories by Anton Chekov, and it is representative of Simon's work only in its rendering of the struggle for personal power as comedy, but not in terms of its structure, setting, characters, and language; it is much too reliant upon the short stories of Chekov to be considered an original Simon script and may, in fact, given the rest of Simon's dramaturgy, be considered a series of exercises rather than a unified play.

Simon's filmscripts will not be considered in this study, because they were written for a medium wholly different from the stage; his television scripts will also be excluded from this study for the same reason. The musical plays for which Simon has written books (Little Me, Sweet Charity, Promises, Promises, They're Playing Our Song) are also considered tangential to this study, because, although they were written for the stage, musical plays are inevitably the result of the collaborative efforts of composer, lyricist, librettist, director, musical director, choreographer, and, often, others as well (producers, stars, etc.). Also, the structure, needs, and limitations of a musical "book" are different from those of the nonmusical text, and, therefore, constitute a separate category for possible critical study.

Simon's first three produced stage plays (Come Blow Your Horn, Barefoot in the Park, The Odd Couple) were derived from personal experiences, the first two from his own, and the third from his brother, Danny's.¹ He subsequently deviated from this source material so often recommended by writing teachers; however, his most recently published play, as of this writing, Chapter Two, is an

¹"Playboy Interview," Playboy, Feb., 1979, p. 74.

extremely personal and subjective play, perhaps too much so; Simon himself has said of it:

. . . the first act of Chapter Two . . . was very, very light comedy. The second act, however, turned into the stark reality of what had happened to me: I'd survived the death of my first wife, I'd gone into a second marriage with Marsha Mason, and, feeling guilt and all of the personal repercussions of it, I'd lashed out at Marsha -- and I wrote about it. Certain critics said, "Don't give us that, don't suddenly change in the middle. Make it all light." Well, my life wasn't all light. I mean, the first few months of my marriage to Marsha were flushed with romance and happiness, but then one suddenly had to deal with the past. Many critics want it all one way: They want it all comedy, not something that grows more serious.²

It is striking and amazing that Mr. Simon, an excellent play craftsman well along in his career, opted to portray "life as it is," rather than to create a viable stage vehicle that displays the artistic requisite of unity of tone when he wrote Chapter Two. His latest play, as of this writing, I Ought to Be in Pictures, also appears to be an extremely personal offering. Perhaps at this point in his career, Mr. Simon has decided to give the audience more of himself and less of his art. Although the two are not necessarily antithetical, he might have learned from a similar earlier experience to keep the distance between himself and his work (perhaps the application of the concept of "distancing" in comedy should refer not only to the relationship between the play and its audience, but to the one between the play and its author as well):

²Ibid., pp. 58-59.

. . . God's Favorite was another (play) that didn't really work. It's the play I'm least objective about, because it was written under the most grueling circumstances. It was an attempt to release or exorcise some of the anguish I was going through following the death of my wife. I was not able to rationalize why somebody like Joan could die of cancer at the age of 39. I was very angry, and writing that play was a kind of cathartic experience for me. But I knew it was not going to be enormously satisfying to the public or the critics to see Joe Benjamin suffering with boils and blisters. It was depressing, yet it was something I wanted to do at that point in my life. I was in the middle of the ocean looking for a log to hang on to, and God's Favorite was the log that I grabbed. I would much rather have had a steamer come along, but that's what got me through that period, and I still think what I tried to do was worth the effort. But I'm willing to accept the failure that came along with it.³

Throughout his career, Simon has written for a particular audience -- middle-class and upper-middle-class residents of New York City and its suburbs, those people who constitute the great majority of Broadway theatergoing audiences. Simon himself has said that, "In theater, you're somewhat limited by the age and socio-economic class of your audience."⁴ A playwright must know the audience for which he writes, although he need not necessarily depict them to themselves. Sophocles wrote to win contests before his fellow citizens, Shakespeare wrote puns, jests, disguises, and low humor for the groundlings, and Moliere wrote endings to please the crown; just so, Neil Simon writes for his audience. This practice is

³Ibid., p. 76.

⁴"Playgirl Interview," Playgirl, Feb., 1976, p. 58.

eminently valid, and historically justified; it becomes unbecoming and breaches artistic integrity only when the playwright crosses the line from writing for his audience to pandering to it. John Quinn believes that perhaps Simon wrote from the wrong side of the line to begin with:

Maybe Neil Simon is funnier and more astute than the fellow at the next table at Elaine's. But if so, only marginally.

. . . Simon has evaluated the basic securely upper-middle-class Broadway audience with the calculation of a carnival weight guesser. Tirelessly, he distills for the expense-account crowd the comfortable trivia of their lives, their vexing non-problems, their placid tempests.

. . . In his rumless, and, for me, frothless daiquiris, they find an uncritical celebration of themselves. His are the plays they could write if they only had the time.⁵

I believe that Simon has been tightrope-walking the borderline between writing for and pandering to his chosen audience, and has done so successfully, for the most part, in his playwriting career to date.

Neil Simon has said that, "my humor usually sees life from the grimmest point of view."⁶ Much of his comedy does indeed derive from sadness, from despair, from sorrow, from melancholy, and from contemporary urban life gone awry and amok. He himself has spoken about how the dismal becomes the comic through the filter of his playwriting:

. . . when I wrote The Odd Couple, I thought I was writing a black comedy. That really sounds ridiculous now, but when I was working on it, I was thinking about divorce

⁵John Quinn, "Minority Report: A Dim View of Neil Simon," New York Daily News, Nov. 21, 1971, p. 48.

⁶"Playboy Interview," p. 76.

and about two men who are basically unhappy. I suppose you could practically trace my life through my plays, because they always come out of what I'm thinking about and what I am as a person. I may have started Come Blow Your Horn when I was 30, but it was about myself at the age of 21. Barney Cashman in Last of the Red Hot Lovers is a little bit of the way I was feeling when I wrote that play, because I was in my early 40's and here was this sexual revolution going on, and a lot of it had slipped by me.⁷

One fact that would support the contention that Simon does not merely pander to his audience is that his plays do indeed deal with serious contemporary personal issues, and are more profound than their immediate and mundane concerns. Susanne Langer says in Feeling and Form that in comedy "the real antagonist is the world."⁸ Neil Simon shares this contention wholeheartedly, although probably unknowingly; to Simon, "life is the villain," and that phrase is undoubtedly the thematic core of his work. "Life is the villain:" this phrase should come to mind often throughout the reading of this study; it will not be repeated at each appropriate juncture; it will not be repeated at all, for, if properly repeated, it would become redundant and dominate the paper in its body as surely as it in fact does in its spirit. The reader is urged to recall it, and to reflect upon its thoroughgoing applicability to the work of Neil Simon as considered in this study: "Life is the villain:" this phrase is the crux of the conflicts in the stage plays of

⁷Ibid., p. 75.

⁸Susanne K. Langer. Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 347.

Neil Simon. It is quoted here in the context in which it was uttered by Neil Simon:

But it's not really the individual lines or jokes that make an audience laugh. They are responding to the overall thing that is going on. If they do not buy the basic situation, nothing will make them laugh. And the audience should always at least be able to see each character's point of view. When I am writing, the play is being acted in my mind -- played as slow as motion can be. And the actors are each waiting for their next line. I become one character, say what he would say in that situation. Then I become the next character, and give an answer. That way I am always on the side of the person who is talking -- so the sides will always be even against each other. So there are no villains. It's life -- that's the villain.⁹

Let us now proceed to consider the conflicts that this villain has engendered in the stage plays of Neil Simon.

⁹Richard Merryman, "When the Funniest Writer in America Tried to Be Serious," Life, May 7, 1971, p. 67.

CHAPTER I:

COMEDY AND THAT WHICH IS COMIC

Before we can proceed to discuss the stage comedies of Neil Simon, we must establish, as best we can, a working definition of what comedy is, of what is comic, and of how these two concepts differ, despite the fact that they often overlap and that, in fact, that which is comic is invariably part of a comedy (as well as being part of other genres of drama, even tragedy). First, let us establish the fact that Simon has indeed called all of these plays under consideration herein "comedies," with the exception of The Gingerbread Lady, which he labels simply "a new play," but which, as I shall endeavor later to show, is indeed a comedy.

Let us begin by discussing that which is comic, this being an easier undertaking than the effort to define comedy comprehensively and meaningfully. (Ben Jonson: "Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers."¹) The overlapping interrelationship between comedy and that which is comic is established by the initial dictionary definition of "comic": "of comedy." This of course is the use of the word "comic" as an adjective; its second stated dictionary definition as an adjective gives us its essential distinction from "comedy"; something "comic" is something "amusing or intended to be amusing; humorous; funny."² Given this definition of "comic," we may understand that, given the fact

¹Paul Lauter, Theories of Comedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 115.

²Webster's New World Dictionary: College Edition (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 292.

that comedy is a form of dramaturgy, it is altogether possible for a performer or a group of performers to be amusing, funny, humorous for two hours upon a stage without having performed a comedy at all. Thus, that which is comic, although it is very much a part of comedy (in speech, gesture, movement, business, costume, etc.), may also be part of other dramatic genres, as well as being part of everyday life, public ceremonies, political speeches, athletic events, etc., while comedy, since it is a self-contained mode of presenting drama, cannot be part or aspect of anything other than itself. (Comedy is not "part" of tragicomedy, that being still another unique entity in the dramaturgical panoply, although of course it does borrow extensively, and, in fact, derives from the two genres after which it is named.) Now then: what is a comedy?

There are basically three types of comedy theory, two having to do with the results/effects of comedy, and one with the form itself. Those theories seeking to deal with the results/effects of comedy focus on why and how man laughs, on the one hand, and on the social utility of comedy on the other. These concerns, both predating Socrates and both discussed briefly by Plato (in Republic, Laws, and Philebus), are not directly relevant to this study. Therefore, the historically controversial question of the social utility of comedy will not be discussed at all. The interminable examinations of why (and how) people laugh, and how they may be made to laugh, have been continued since the eighteenth century, most especially by philosophers (Hobbes, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Bergson, Santayana) and psychologists (Lipps, Freud, Jekels, Kris), and only relatively rarely by critics, such as Hazlitt, for example. Although these considerations, especially those of Freud, have aided play-

wrights, directors, actors, and critics in creating, presenting and analyzing comic characters and situations, they have not contributed consequentially to the rethinking and reshaping of the structure, parts or form of the dramatic genre known as comedy.

In order to discover what the dramatic form called comedy is, we must begin with the seminal, although frustratingly incomplete, theoretical work on the subject -- The Poetics of Aristotle -- and return to it time and again, as have all the theorists of comedy subsequent to Aristotle. Walter Kerr, in his book Tragedy and Comedy, makes the point that comedy always rides the coattails of tragedy; and so it is, even concerning the theories about the two genres. So much of Aristotle's theory of comedy has been lost for so long, that the substance of his theory of comedy has been distilled and extracted from what he wrote about tragedy. The inferences drawn from his assessment of tragedy and applied to comedy may well be a valid interpretation of what he said (or hoped to say), but they are definitely not communicated from him to posterity. Keeping this caveat in mind, let us examine what generations of comedy theorists have inferred from Aristotle.

Aristotle does tell us directly that comedy, like tragedy, is an imitation of an action. He asserts also that tragedy seeks to represent men as better than they are and comedy to represent them as worse than they are in life. And, he does give an exceedingly brief history of the assumed origins and development of comedy. Finally, he tells us that tragedy and comedy share the mediums, objects and manners of imitation. The elements of drama, in order of their importance, as delineated by Aristotle, are: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, music. (There is some contro-

versy regarding the precise order of the final four elements, but it is universally agreed that plot and character, in that order, head the list.) He says in The Poetics that he will speak of comedy "later," but there is no extant evidence of his having done so. We do not know how, according to Aristotle, the elements of drama are used in comedy (except, regarding plot, he says that the comic poet constructs it along the lines of probability). And, while he does say that tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, we get no parallel classification of comedy. Also, Aristotle gives us no equivalent in comedy to the cathartic purgation of pity and fear that we are supposed to feel after having viewed a tragedy.³

All comedy theory in the western world has, in some way, been affected by the fragments and implications left to us by Aristotle. The post-Aristotelian ancient, and the medieval theorists spent their time translating, interpreting, amending, and attempting to render complete the work of Aristotle. The Coislinian Tractate, estimated to have been written between the fourth and second centuries B.C., by an author or authors now-unknown, is thought by some experts to be the preservation of the theories of Aristotle about comedy. The Coislinian Tractate states that comedy is an imitation of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect, of sufficient length (to render the plot in toto), presented by acting rather than by narrative, and, through pleasure and laughter effecting the purgation, among the members of the audience, of those emotions it displays in the play. The Tractate then discusses the causes and the nature of laughter in a

³Lauter, pp. 9-20.

manner that seems intended for the comic playwright and actor. It also introduces several concepts that have remained essential to subsequent discussions of comedy (although not necessarily due to its direct influence):

1) Comedy differs from abuse, because whereas abuse openly censures the failings of humanity, comedy requires another element to chastise (emphasis or innuendo);

2) The comic playwright will deride the flaws of the human soul and of the human body;

3) As in tragedy there is fear, so in comedy there should be laughter;

4) The elements of comedy are as follows (notice that they are the same elements listed by Aristotle, but not listed in the exact same order): plot, character, thought, diction, music, spectacle;

5) The comic plot is composed of a structure that combines the ludicrous incidents;

6) The characters of comedy are the buffoons, the ironical, and the imposters;

7) The diction of comedy is the vulgate, the colloquial.

The Tractate also lists the kinds of comedy current at and before the time of its writing, and the various parts of those kinds of comedies; these considerations are not relevant to this study.⁴

The Romans, especially Cicero and Horace, speak of oratory and poetry, respectively, but Cicero does pursue the inquiry of how laughter is brought about. He also makes a pronunciamiento about comedy that was greatly admired and

⁴Ibid., pp. 21-23.

often quoted by the critics of the Italian Renaissance; Cicero maintains that comedy is a copy of life, a mirror of custom, and a reflection of truth. He says that what is laughed at is the baseness and deformity of something offensive rendered in an inoffensive manner.⁵

Aelius Donatus, writing in approximately 350 A.D., provides a history of comedy that he no doubt culled from the Greeks, and gives what he claims is a definition of comedy by the Greeks, that it is a harmless arrangement of private and civil deeds. As his own definition of comedy he gives the following: comedy is a story treating of various habits and customs of public and private affairs, from which one may learn what is of use in life, on the one hand, and what must be avoided, on the other.⁶

John Tzetses, writing in the twelfth century A.D., echoes Donatus' history of comedy, and continues the critical-historical evaluation of comedy as an imitation of an action that is ridiculous, and that is purgative of emotions, constructive of life, and moulded by laughter and pleasure. He asserts, further, that while the aim of tragedy is to move the audience to lamentation, the aim of comedy is to move its audience to laughter. And, he states that tragedy recounts deeds of the past while comedy displays the fiction of the affairs of contemporary daily life.⁷

The Italian Renaissance abounded with theorists, historians, and translators of comedy. The comedy theorists of the Italian Renaissance were influenced most especially by the work of Plato, the Ars Poetica of Horace, the writings of Aelius Donatus, and rhetorical analyses of the plays of

⁵Ibid., pp. 24-26. ⁶Ibid., pp. 27-32.

⁷Ibid., pp. 33-39.

Terence by Roman scholars. All of these considerations contributed to the many analyses of The Poetics that were written in late sixteenth-century Italy. Among the earliest of these analyses were those written by Francisco Robortello (1548) and Vincenzo Maggi (1550). The most prominent comedy theorists of the Italian Renaissance, and their contributions in brief (with the approximate dates of these contributions) constitute the following list:

1) Bernardino Daniello, La Poetica (1536):
Materials and subjects of comedy may be common phenomena, such as everyday occurrences.⁸

2) Giovanni Georgio Trissino, Poetics (1536):
Trissino translated The Poetics of Aristotle into Latin, colored with the Horatian philosophical inclination that was so common among the critics of the Italian Renaissance. He drew comparisons between comedy and tragedy based on his own understanding of Aristotle, and declared that tragedy is factual while comedy is fictional. He maintained that comedy imitates the lowest actions of men, and that it teaches through scorn and censure of the bad and the ugly. Trissino urged the comic playwright to make an outline of his plot first and foremost.⁹

3) Francesco Robortello, Ars Comica (1548):
Like Trissino, Robortello applied Aristotle's dicta on tragedy to comedy. He stressed the importance of plot, declared that comedy involves "low" characters, and restated the Aristotelian elements of drama. Robortello also wrote a commentary on Aristotle's Poetics.¹⁰

⁸Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy: Meaning and Form (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 41-43.

⁹Lauter, pp. 42-47. ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 48-63.

4) Vincenzo Maggi (pen-name, Madius), On the Ridiculous (1550): Maggi maintained, as did many of his contemporaries, that laughter comes from a baseness or ugliness that is without pain; however, he added the critical refinement that baseness or ugliness (*turpitude*) must necessarily be joined with wonder (*admiratio*) in things that are rightly to be called ridiculous. Maggi also discoursed on the age-old question of the social value of art: its utility versus its "corrupting influence," as he called it. Since the time of Plato (and, indubitably, before then as well) to the present, this topic has provided an overabundance of grist for the universal critical mill.¹¹

5) Julius Caesar Scaliger, Poetices Libri Septem (1561): Tragedy, like comedy, is patterned after real life, but it differs from comedy in the rank of the characters, in the nature of the action, and in the outcome. Comedy employs characters from rustic or low city life. The language of comedy is that of everyday life. Comedies never admit kings, save in such a rare instance as the Amphitryon of Plautus. In comedy there are jests, revelling, weddings with drunken carousals, tricks played by slaves, drunkenness, old men deceived and cheated of their money. The beginning of a comedy presents a confused state of affairs, and the confusion is happily cleared up at the end; there are, on the other hand, many comedies which end unhappily for some of the characters. (Scaliger considered Euripides' Cyclops similar to comedy.)¹²

6) Minturno (Antonio Sebastiano), Arte Poetica (1563): In dialogue form, Minturno asserts that matter for comedy is afforded by the common folk of the city or the

¹¹Ibid., pp. 64-73. ¹²Corrigan, pp. 58-63.

country, the farmer, the common soldier, the petty merchant, and similar persons. He also reiterates Horace's contention that the mission of the comic poet is to teach and to please. And Minturno sets in opposition the precepts of Cicero and those he believes to be of Aristotle; he says that although Cicero may define comedy as an imitation of life, a mirror of manners, and an image of truth, nevertheless, according to the opinion of Aristotle, it might be said that comedy is no other than an imitation of pleasing and amusing happenings, whether public or private.¹³

7) Lodovico Castelvetro, Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e esposta (1570): This translation of and commentary about The Poetics introduces the idea of the three unities. In this work also, Castelvetro states that the happy denouement of comedy is formed by the removal of insult from the hero or from one dear to him, or by the cessation of a longstanding shame, or by the recovery of an esteemed person or possession which was lost, or by the fulfillment of love; and the sorrowful denouement of a tragedy is formed by the opposite of these things.¹⁴

8) Bernardo Pino de Cagli, in an essay published concomitantly with Erofilomachia, a play by Sforzo d'Oddo (1572): Comedy is a representation of the passions, thoughts and actions by familiar conversation; each person on the stage speaks according to his own level in society, and appropriate in manner to his listeners and to the circumstances.¹⁵

¹³Lauter, pp. 78-86. ¹⁴Ibid., pp. 87-97.

¹⁵Corrigan, pp. 65-66.

9) Antonio Riccoboni, Ars Comica (1585): This essay is a neo-Aristotelian rendering of the definition and parts of comedy. Comedy differs from tragedy in that it treats of inferior men while tragedy presents superior ones. Comedy has an active manner of imitation, like tragedy; and, as tragedy purges pity and fear, so comedy purges the ridiculous from the perceiver by rendering the ridiculous pleasurable. In tragedy, wonder is caused by the wretched and fearful, in comedy by the base and laughable. Comedy is "lower" than tragedy. The elements of drama are fable, character, thought, diction, harmony, and spectacle. Comedy is realized in one circuit of the sun (unity of time); the fable ought to represent one sequence of events without being "contaminated" by superfluous episodes, and it should be displayed in one setting (unities of plot and place). The comic fable should bear a verisimilitude to life and to the actual events therein. There is a change from adversity to prosperity in the course of a comedy.¹⁶

When Riccoboni disagrees with Scaliger in saying that there is indeed danger in comedy ("for otherwise the conclusion would be dull"), he is anticipating the work of Susanne Langer, who maintains that comedy brings us the future (of the characters therein) fraught with dangers and opportunities.¹⁷

The only truly important contribution to comedy theory from the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century was not a treatise but a speech in a comedy: in Every Man Out

¹⁶Lauter, pp. 98-112.

¹⁷Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 323.

of His Humour (1599), Ben Jonson introduced the theory of "humours;" this theory has been interpreted to mean that a character in a comedy is dominated by one of the four basic "humours" (blood, choler, melancholy, phlegm), and it is this imbalance of humours, or the prevalence of one humour that causes him to behave in an outlandish, ridiculous, ludicrous, stilted, comic fashion. Not only does this theory echo the neo-Aristotelian demand for presenting baseness to the audience to purge them of it, but it anticipates Henri Bergson's assessment of what makes for laughter -- replacement of the "élan vital" by "something mechanical encrusted on the living."¹⁸ Jonson's theory of "humours" will be quoted in Chapter V, "Ya Gotta Have Friends."

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was much discussion of the "rules" of dramaturgy. Pierre Corneille himself, in Premier Discours De Utilité et des Parties du Poème Dramatique (1660), restates and interprets the work of Aristotle.¹⁹ Molière is moved to defend his plays as representations of vice to be seen for their morally corrective value. He maintains, in an introduction to Tartuffe (1664), that the duty of comedy is to reform people while entertaining them; but, in La Critique de l'École des Femmes (1663), through the character Dorante, he insists that the foremost rule is to please one's audience, and that that rule supersedes all other "rules."²⁰

George Farquhar, in a lighthearted, goodnatured letter to a friend (written in 1702 and later published as A Discourse Upon Comedy in Reference to the English Stage),

¹⁸Corrigan, p. 215. ¹⁹Ibid., pp. 173-175.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 176-177.

contends that the by-then accepted neo-Aristotelian "rules" should not be sycophantically served and dogmatically dictated to playwrights, because Aristotle was not a poet and was not writing laws but merely making observations. Farquhar jovially and convincingly argues against insistence upon the three unities. Both Farquhar and Congreve (in Concerning Humor in Comedy, written in 1696) discuss the importance to the playwright of knowing his audience members' sense of humor; Farquhar also adds that the playwright should address the particular audience of his time and place and culture. He concludes that comedy is no more than a well-structured tale well-told as an agreeable vehicle for counsel or reproof.²¹

Samuel Johnson, in The Rambler, #156, written in 1751, shares Farquhar's opposition to the "rules," and states that no "literary dictator" has the authority to declare or enforce arbitrary rules in art.²²

Carlo Goldoni, in Il Teatro Comico (1751), wrote that comedy was invented to correct foibles and ridicule disagreeable habits. In his Memoirs (1787), he recalls a note he made to himself to treat subjects of character, for that is the source of good comedy.²³ This is a sentiment with which Neil Simon agrees wholeheartedly.²⁴

²¹Ibid., pp. 198-202. ²²Lauter, p. 125.

²³Corrigan, pp. 217-220.

²⁴Sydney Edwards, "The Arts," London Evening Standard, Feb. 14, 1969, p. 18;
Playgirl, Feb., 1976, p. 141.

The socially-corrective nature of comedy, and its utility as a medium for social education and enlightenment occupied such critics as Diderot, Beaumarchais (also a playwright, of course), Lessing, Schlegel, and other eighteenth and nineteenth century critics. This strain of criticism led to its modern counterpart in the work of George Meredith. In his lecture of 1877, later published as An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, Meredith discourses on the type of society and audience that needs, and in fact requires, comedy for its intellectual sustenance. He insists that only in a society of vital intellectual activity, acuity, and relative equality of the sexes can comedy thrive, and he asserts that in such a society comedy would be requisite. Such a society, he implies, welcomes and craves instruction, enlightenment, and the sheer intellectual joy of comedy. He feels that there is a symbiotic relationship between comedy and a society that can call itself civilized -- that is in such a culture comedy flourishes and that comedies in such a culture must generate thoughtful laughter in their audiences.²⁵

Finally, the critical evaluations of the form of drama known as comedy have, over the past two centuries, de-emphasized examinations of the parts of comedy, and, instead, placed their emphasis on the study of the genre as a whole entity; instead of seeking to classify its constituent parts and its structure, more and more critical evaluations of comedy over the past two centuries have sought to discover its overall essence and uniqueness. Hegel says that comedy creates a world of which man thinks he is master, but a world without substance, a world of intrinsically-assumed stability, while tragedy creates a world of substance over which man comes, ultimately, to have no control at all.²⁶ Schopenhauer,

²⁵Corrigan, pp. 205-214.

²⁶Lauter, pp. 350-354.

who comments on the comic at length, briefly states, in On the Aesthetics of Poetry, that comedy is an assertion of the human will to live, of the value, goodness, joy, and amusement that constitute human life.²⁷ This thread is picked up by Feibleman, who finds an affirmation of "an ideal logical order" in comedy,²⁸ and Langer, who feels that comedy embodies the continuity and vitality of the fundamental rhythm of life.²⁹ Northrop Frye maintains that a life-sustaining process takes place in New Comedy and in subsequent comedy by means of a "comic Oedipal situation," whereby the old order is displaced by the new.³⁰ At the root of all of these theories is the contention that comedy exalts life, that the ongoing vitality of humanity is being asserted and celebrated every time a comedy is performed.

Walter Kerr, a contemporary of Simon's, says in his book, Tragedy and Comedy, that comedy deals with the common man, and that it represents him not as better or worse than those in the audience but as the same.³¹ This assessment may not be valid for all comedy, but it is a correct evaluation of the work of Neil Simon and most of his contemporaries. Perhaps, comedy theory, like comedy itself, is most effective, perceptive, and right in and for its own time. The theorists to be discussed in connection with Simon's work in the forthcoming chapters are all "modern," with the exception of Ben Jonson, and all of the twentieth century, with the exception of Jonson and George Meredith, whose major contribution to comedy theory was made in 1877, and published in 1897.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 354-361. ²⁸Corrigan, pp. 263-271.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 241-253. ³⁰Ibid., pp. 236-241.

³¹Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 46.

This previous statement does not mean that the theories of the critics predating Jonson and Meredith (or those of the "modern era" who will not be herein considered) are in any way invalid or of lesser merit in their contentions and contributions than those that will be cited. Certainly, all discussions of Western comedy theory must begin with Aristotle, must include the theorists of the Italian Renaissance, must voyage through all the centuries in their oblique voyage back to Aristotle via the modern neo-Aristotelianism of Elder Olson, and must include many other theorists not even mentioned in this study. The fact is that a considerable range of theories may be considered valid, for there may be a comedy found to which they may be fruitfully applied; but, by the same token, no theory of comedy is foolproof and comprehensive, for a comedy may be found to which it cannot be applied. A comedy is a living organism -- it is regenerated every time it is performed on a stage; a theory is an enclosure. The theory may house the comedy comfortably, but it has not room for all, nor would all comedies accept the accommodations of any particular theory. And even those comedies most at home in a particular theoretical dwelling will take occasional sojourns outside to sample the air and reinvigorate themselves. All a critic can hope to do is to discover the most suitable dwelling for each play, while taking great care to provide a garden outside the enclosure, and an open doorway leading to that garden.

One may fancifully conjecture that perhaps Aristotle's thesis on comedy was not lost; perhaps he chose not to write it, knowing full well that comedy could not be pigeonholed, could not be totally circumscribed by theory, by dogma, by any mode of criticism.

Having said this, let me add my iota of pseudo-Aristotelian conjecture to the cornucopia of such conjectures that already exists: Perhaps Aristotle meant that the characters in a play are better men or worse than those in the audience watching them at the time. Perhaps the characters in a comedy are baser than the members of the audience because they are acting out primal needs and mundane functions while the audience finds itself in the relatively dignified position of sitting and observing them; and perhaps the characters in a tragedy are superior to the members of the audience watching them because they are acting out grand, cosmos-challenging, self-fulfilling, self-sacrificing myths while the members of the audience are doing something so mundane as merely sitting and watching them!

Critics have been proving Ben Jonson's adage ("comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers") every time they sat down to write and attempted to fix this unfixable genre; fittingly, critics slip on a banana peel whenever they have taken several steps and feel they have come to the doorstep of the abode that houses the essential nature of comedy.

The question, then, still persists: What is comedy? Certain popularly-held definitions of comedy will help us not only to understand, to some degree, what it is, but they will also help us to understand some of the misconceptions and misrepresentations inherent in some contemporary concepts of comedy. These definitions may be more useful in helping us discover what comedy is not than to discover what it is; but, of course, such exclusionary considerations will also bring us closer, circuitously, to what it is. Let us then examine some of these definitions of comedy.

Comedy is often considered simply a play or other literary composition with a nontragic ending. Although we are aware of literary compositions other than a play that are labeled comedies (for example, Dante's Divine Comedy, Balzac's Human Comedy, and Saroyan's The Human Comedy), let us agree that for the purposes of this study the term comedy will apply only to plays written expressly for the stage.

This definition of comedy is evidence of the danger of oversimplification. It would lead us to believe that any literary composition with a nontragic ending is a comedy, and this statement is simply not valid. Surely, Homer's epic, The Odyssey, Euripides' satyr play, The Cyclops, and Williams' bittersweet drama, The Glass Menagerie are not tragedies, yet, just as surely, they are not comedies either. And what is "a nontragic ending;" for that matter, what is a tragic ending? Is it the disfigurement, demise, insight, elevation, sanctification, resurrection, etc. of the protagonist? Might not some of these "tragic" endings figure in a comedy, or, in fact, be missing from a tragedy? In the context of this study, these questions are merely food for thought, but they do, in fact, alert us to the dangers of seeking, and accepting, the simple answer.

Comedy is often considered simply a work of drama or literature that treats characters and situations with humor. Inadvertently, this definition gets at the heart of what comedy means fundamentally and most generally: comedy might well be defined as humorous treatment of characters or situations, or, more correctly, characters in situations (farce might then be defined as humorous treatment of situations with characters). The problem with this simple, basic definition is of course that one man's "humorous treatment" is another's boorishness or insipidity or boredom. What, in

fact, is a "humorous treatment?" Is The Cherry Orchard a tragedy or a comedy or something in between? Even Chekov and Stanislavski themselves could not agree upon this issue. But, we may safely say (if any definition of comedy is safe) that a comedy is a play in which a playwright has provided characters that he hopes the audience will find amusing in one way or another, characters that he places into situations that will, either in themselves be amusing to the audience in one way or another, or situations that will heighten, highlight, or magnify the hopefully amusing aspects, idiosyncracies, and relationships of the previously-established, hopefully-amusing characters.

The various subcategories of stage comedy (farce, comedy of manners, satire, et. al.) add to the already manifold complications of defining this multifarious and varied form of dramaturgy. To complicate this matter even further, there are other forms of comedy which are also forms of "the comic," that is, they are not only styles in which comedies are written and performed, but they are also styles of writing and performing which are "comic," that is, intended to make us laugh directly at them, independently of the mode of presentation in which we may find them (vaudeville sketch, standup routine, record album, etc.). Among these other forms of "comedy" and of "the comic" we find parody, lampoon, burlesque, mimicry, and pantomime.

Colloquially, comedy is often considered merely an amusing incident or event. If the reader will recall, it was stated in the foregoing distinction between "comedy" and "the comic" that everyday incidents or events may be comic, but that they are not comedy. Despite appearances, this definition does not challenge that assertion. We have often heard an event or an incident described as a comedy; I submit that in so describing an event or incident the person so

describing it viewed it as a staged presentation of comedy -- that is, an amusingly dramatic situation with a specific beginning, middle and end, in which amusing characters (at least in the context of the situation) took part in amusing situations. Therefore, not only does this definition not contradict the assertion that a comedy is a dramatized performance designed to amuse, but, in fact, it reinforces the impact of the structure, characters and situations of comedy upon the daily lives of everyday people. The artistic concept of "a comedy" is something they can grasp by example even if they (and others) cannot define it.

What is a theme suitable for comedy? We know of characters and situations suitable for comedy, but any theme may be rendered suitable for any mode of presentation. For example, a particular subject, such as the history of man, might be depicted as a tragedy (as indeed it was by Imre Madach in The Tragedy of Man), or that same subject might be rendered as a type of comedy, as it was in Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth; in the case of the latter play then, the theme of human history is used to serve the artistic purpose of creating comedy.

Tragedies, such as Hamlet, and even King Lear, among many other plays and works of literature, possess certain elements of comedy, but are, of course, not comedies in themselves.

The process of examining the various interpretations of the meaning of comedy shows us how complex, difficult, and, perhaps, impossible it is to define comedy precisely and comprehensively; however, the theorists of comedy have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the general aspects and qualities of this quintessential form of dramaturgy. As long as we understand and accept the fact that these theorists have provided us with useful and insightful,

but not by any means inviolable theoretical aids to the understanding of comedy, we may put their contributions to excellent use in discussing the comedies of a specific playwright, of a specific type, or of a specific period, or, in fact, of the total body of the world's comedies. This study will incorporate the work of many of the important theorists of comedy, from Aristotle to Susanne Langer, into its exploration of the comedy of Neil Simon.

Having stated the impossibility of fixing absolutely the essence of comedy, the author will now, foolhardily, attempt to provide a working definition of comedy that will serve as a guideline for the formulation and understanding of this study, as well as, it is hoped, serving as an aid to the general understanding of what comedy is. The following working definition of comedy borrows liberally from the aforementioned theorists of comedy; for the sake of coherence, unity, time, and space, credit will not here be meted to the individual theorists as their theories are put forth in the following amalgam of comedy theory. Here, then, is the working definition of comedy relative specifically to this study, but, it is hoped, helpful beyond it as well:

Comedy is a branch of literature, primarily of dramatic literature, and, for the purposes of this study, only of dramatic literature. A comedy is a play in which a playwright has provided characters that he hopes the audience will find amusing in one way or another (belly laugh, guffaw, smile, arched eyebrow, inner glow), characters that he places into situations that will, either in themselves be amusing to the audience in one way or another, or situations that will heighten, highlight or magnify the hopefully amusing aspects, idiosyncracies, and interrelationships of the previously-established, hopefully-amusing characters. The fact that the playwright wants to amuse the audience does not necessarily

mean that he wants to cater to them, make them feel satisfied and comfortable with things as they are, or provide them with merely frivolous subject matter to elicit their laughter. On the contrary, some authors of comedy, from Aristophanes to Stoppard, have written comedies dealing with the most serious issues of human existence and of their own contemporary societies, challenging things as they are, challenging their audiences to reflect upon their most dearly-held and most comfortable notions, and, sometimes to act upon them as well (i.e., the satirically brilliant anti-war solution in Aristophanes' Lysistrata). In fact, the authors of comedy have been historically regarded by the theorists of comedy as moralists, as morally conservative artists who possess a firm notion of how life should be lived, of how a society should function, and who portray their perceived perversions of these proper modes of existence upon the stage. Each author of comedy has a "norm" -- his assumed sense of the way things ought to be; sometimes this "norm" is presented by him upon the stage, sometimes it is merely suggested in and by the play, sometimes it remains with him in his study; however, his perceived violations or perversions of this "norm" constitute the fabric of his dramaturgy.

There are many types of stage comedy, none totally exclusive of the others; that is, the distinctive features and elements of one type may be found in a substantially different type of comedy; for example, elements of farce may be found in a comedy of manners, while a romantic comedy may feature moments and matters of satire. It is not the function of this study to list, classify and define the various types of comedy; besides, there are difficult theoretical questions with regard to the distinction of types of comedy,

questions which are not within the purview of this author to discuss at this time; for example, is "low comedy" the same as "farce" (this author does not believe so), and can a "romance" sometimes be considered a type of comedy (this author believes so)? The following list presents the most-usually-cited types of comedy; this list is random, and assumes no qualitative classification of the seriousness, profundity, or effect of the styles listed, for such classification would be extraneous and superfluous to this study; the contemporarily prevalent types of comedy are the following: farce, low comedy, domestic comedy, sentimental comedy, romantic comedy, comedy of character, comedy of manners, drawing-room comedy, social comedy, comedy of ideas, verbal comedy, high comedy, black comedy, burlesque, lampoon, parody, and satire. As stated before, tragicomedy is not a type of comedy. Also as stated before, the above list of the types of comedy does not at all mean to suggest their exclusivity from each other (some theorists might categorize "comedy of manners," "drawing-room comedy," "social comedy," "comedy of ideas," and "verbal comedy" under the all-encopassing label of "high comedy," and some may collectively classify "burlesque," "lampoon," and "parody" all under the heading of "satire"). Finally, let it be understood by the reader that the above list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive.

Essential to the creation and understanding of most comedy are an understanding, either intellectual or instinctive, of the following structured patterns, and of their subsequent violation or total breakdown in the course of a comedy: repetition, sequence, duplication, reversal, contrast, surprise, incongruity, delay, and interruption. Comedy also often suspends natural laws, and the audience must readily and easily accept such suspension. This "willing suspension

of disbelief" as it applies to comedy means not only that the audience realizes the fact that the character being pummeled by a slapstick in a farce is not truly being hurt, but also that the audience accepts the world of the comedy that the playwright has created as being "real" within its own given dimensions. The primary aid in this willing suspension of disbelief is the concept of "distancing," a concept of great importance to most comedy. By distancing the audience from the comedy and its characters, the playwright is keeping the audience at a sufficient remove from the play to allow it to suspend its disbelief and laugh freely at the actions on the stage.

A stage comedy needs its audience very much; it "lives" most especially on the stage. The audience is often a single participatory character in a comedy, consequentially affecting the rhythm and motion of the play by its laughter, hush, applause, and other reactions. The audience influences the primary technical requirements made of the actors of all comedy: pace and timing. Pace does not mean all-out speed at all times; pace means, for actor, director, and audience, finding the particular rhythm of each specific comedy and never losing it once it has been tested and found satisfactory in performance; however, this pace must never be mummified, for it must vary slightly from performance to performance, based upon the audience's response to the actors' timing. Arguably, the concept of timing is the single most important element in the performance of all comedy. Timing means the artful serving, regulation, and manipulation of the pace of the play, its acts, scenes, beats, speeches, lines, words, syllables, inflections, and pauses by the actors in order to present that play to its greatest advantage.

Comedy generally deals with "ordinary" people, rather than with gods, mythological heroes, or royalty; even the characters in "high comedy," although they may possess wealth, power, status, breeding, and elegance, are mere, sometimes exceedingly mere, mortals. The most notable exceptions to the above-stated generalization, among many others, are the multifarious "Amphitryon" plays, which feature Zeus and Mercury and the royal couple Amphitryon and Alcmene, and The Frogs by Aristophanes, which features the god Dionysus and the immortal tragic poets Aeschylus and Euripides. Concomitantly, comedy not only deals with ordinary people, but it also usually deals with the mundane, day-to-day dealings, activities, habits, and needs of people, or, it brings down to earth the supposedly extraordinary aspects of human life, as, for example, Tartuffe's presumed religiosity, or the "romance" between Bottom and Titania. To comedy, the human body, its clothing, its needs, its environment, and its shortcomings are of paramount importance.

Perhaps the most prevalent cliché used in the attempt to define comedy is that it is a play with a "happy ending." Like all clichés and easy answers, it must not be trusted. What is a happy ending? How long does it last? For whom is it happy? For an audience, any comedy that it has enjoyed cannot have a happy ending because the audience wishes it to go on forever, or, at least, certainly for longer than it does. If the audience has not enjoyed it, it has lasted far too long for that audience already, and the audience has disconnected itself from the play long before it ended; (perhaps the ridiculous ultimate of "distancing" is to put on a play so terrible that it causes the audience, first intellectually, then physically, to leave the theater).

Are the endings of comedies happy and satisfactory for their protagonists (there is only one protagonist per play, although sometimes a group is taken as an individual entity) and/or for the characters that the audience has come to care about in the play? Not at all. For example, Alceste, the protagonist of Molière's The Misanthrope, has little to be happy about at the end of the play; (many critics believe this comedy to verge upon tragedy, but it is, nevertheless, most often considered, and played as, a comedy); and the protagonist of Hecht-MacArthur's The Front Page, Hildy Johnson, and his fiancée, will find their honeymoon trainride, for which they are heading at play's end, considerably disrupted by the machination of Johnson's editor, Walter Burns, who delivers one of the great tag lines in all of comedy: after having assured Johnson that he will no longer tamper with his private life, as soon as that ace reporter leaves, Burns telephones the authorities and tells them to apprehend the imminent bridegroom, for, "the son-of-a-bitch stole my watch!"

No, comedy does not always end happily. It cannot, for it implies, if not asserts, that life goes on, and the process of life is not always a happy one. However, many comedies do conclude with a reassertion, a celebration, a glorification of life, and of the very process of its continuation. This process is symbolized at the end of comedies by a wedding, an engagement, or some other formal, ritual ceremony, such as birth rites, initiations, feasts, or the celebrations welcoming the forthcoming season, usually spring. If there is a "happy ending" at the end of most comedies, therefore, it is not necessarily happiness either for characters or audience, but, rather, exultation for the

entire human family, celebrating survival and its self-regeneration through procreation and its representations: marriage and the fertility of spring. If tragedy is transcendence and fundamental change in (a) human life, then comedy is sustenance and the perpetuation of the timelessly elemental patterns of human life.

A word is in order here about the term "musical comedy." A musical comedy is not a distinct type of comedy, it is a distinct type of musical play; that is to say that a play generally considered to be a musical comedy will usually fall into one of the previously-listed subcategories of comedy; it is a comedy with music, singing, and dancing; for example, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum is a comedy with music, but its correct classification as a comedy subtype is that of farce; How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying is a satire, and Company is a social comedy. And, of course, any comedy may include music, dancing, singing, pantomime, spectacle, and any and all of the rest of the elements of theater; Aristophanes' comedies had music, they indubitably had dancing, and surely they had spectacle. Comedies need not at all be representational, realistic, and rigidly true-to-life; in fact, it would be most difficult so stringently to delimit them.

What is comedy, then? We know it instinctively, but we cannot define it precisely; we theorize about it, but we cannot fix its essence exactly; we create it, we see it, we acknowledge it, but its essential mystery remains; unlike tragedy, its essential mystery is part of its power (even its origins are more mysterious than those of tragedy); the mystery of tragedy is in its content, the mystery of comedy is in its form.

CHAPTER II:

THE PLAYS

This section will be a brief consideration of the "action" of each of Neil Simon's stage comedies, from Come Blow Your Horn through Chapter Two (and excluding The Good Doctor for the reasons set forth later in this chapter), to provide a guide and a basis for the subsequent discussion of these plays, and to determine whether there is a perceptible line of development in this playwright's use of dramatic action. By "action" is meant the essential core of what happens in each given play. The assessment of the "action" will be derived strictly from the text, and will be as objective as possible; the evaluation, comparison, and overview of the development of his use of dramatic action will evolve inductively from this study of each text, relying also on comedy theory and the history of drama, and on this author's own perception of the development of Simon's dramaturgy. Other elements of dramaturgy, such as setting, character, and language, will be discussed in this chapter only as they relate to the specific action of each play.

Come Blow Your Horn, originally produced in 1961, was Simon's first produced, full-length stage comedy. The time is "the present," the place is Alan Baker's apartment in the East Sixties, in New York City. The play is in three acts.

Alan Baker is a playboy who spends his time carousing rather than working at the job that pays for his carousing -- being a salesman for his father's wax-fruit business. He is having an affair with Peggy Evans, but he is in love with Connie Dayton. His brother, Buddy, just twenty-one years old yesterday, has "run away from home" for the first time in his

life. He moves in with Alan. Their mother and father are distressed by this action and continually come to the apartment, separately, to express their separate distresses. Buddy, shy and introverted at first, assumes Alan's playboy role during a three-week transformation period. For his part, Alan, at first the catalyst of Buddy's changeover, subsequently becomes disturbed by it. Finally, Alan accepts Buddy's usurpation of his ethos, and assumes for himself the mode of life his father has envisioned for him all along: He decides to marry Connie, wins two important orders for his father's business, and will take charge of the business while his parents go for a four-month vacation around the world.

The play observes the unities of place and action; it covers three weeks in time. It is a representational and realistic play. It has six characters, plus a female walk-on, Aunt Gussie, who appears only immediately before the final curtain.

The theme of Come Blow Your Horn is the enduring power and viability of the upper-middle-class values of its characters and, by implication, for the target audience: upper-middle-class New Yorkers, especially Jews. The play is an affirmation of the values of its audience: we know at play's end that once Buddy has sowed his wild oats he will follow in Alan's ultimately domesticated footsteps. This affirmation of the values of his target audience is one of the thoroughgoing traits of Simon's work.¹

¹This is an assertion with which most critics are in agreement; for example, note John Lahr's comments about the play Simon wrote after Come Blow Your Horn:

Barefoot in the Park (1963) was the next comedy Simon wrote. The entire action of the play takes place in the top-floor apartment of a brownstone on East Forty-eighth

John Lahr, Up Against the Fourth Wall: Essays on the Modern Theatre (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 84:

Satire's laughter is a deflation of conventional values; situation comedy is merely an extension of them. In Barefoot in the Park, the newly-married daughter is giving her widowed mother a marital pep talk.

CORIE: You know, underneath that Army uniform, you're still a young, vital woman . . . Do you know what I think you really need?

MOTHER: Yes, and I don't want to hear it.

(She gets up and moves away)

CORIE (Goes to her): Because you're afraid to hear the truth.

MOTHER: It's not the truth I'm afraid to hear. It's the "word" you're going to use.

CORIE: You're darn right I'm going to use that word . . . It's love!

MOTHER: Oh . . . Thank you.

The joke in the Simon story is the same as the tenor of the play. What is fearful to the mother is the gut of the word. Is her daughter going to say "screw" or "fuck?" What is funny and accessible to the middle-class audiences is the sense of decorum which isolates and rationalizes truth on the stage.

Street in New York City, and much is made of the physical demands of climbing the five flights of stairs required to reach it: "CORIE: Yes, it's five flights. If you don't count the front stoop. TELEPHONE MAN: I counted the front stoop."²

The play is in three acts, four scenes. It centers on Corie Bratter, a young woman newly married to Paul, a somewhat stuffy lawyer just beginning his career. The theme of Barefoot in the Park is Corie's awakening to her sexuality and to her life as a woman, and her concomitant liberation of Paul from his stuffiness and her mother from her staid middle-aged life. She is abetted in these liberations by Victor Velasco, erstwhile bohemian and fifty-eight-year-old derelict bon vivant.

Barefoot in the Park covers six days of actual time, and observes the unities of place and action. It is a representational play written in the heightened realistic mode. It has six characters. It is a domestic comedy, although a case may be made for its being a comedy of character as well.

Simon next wrote The Odd Couple (1965). The action of this play takes place in an apartment on Riverside Drive in New York City. The play is in three acts, four scenes. It covers a period of over two weeks, but observes the unities of place and action.

That action begins with a poker game in the apartment of "divorced, broke and sloppy" Oscar Madison, a sportswriter for the New York Post. The participants in the game -- Vinnie, Roy, Speed, and Murray, the cop -- are far more concerned than Oscar about the absence from the game of their

²Neil Simon, Barefoot in the Park (New York: Samuel French, 1964), p. 7.

friend, neurotic fussbudget Felix Ungar. ("The only man in the world with clenched hair," according to Oscar.³) Felix finally arrives: he and his wife have separated and he is more shaken by this than most other men would be. Oscar agrees to let Felix move in with him. The results are disastrous: Felix takes over the housekeeping of Oscar's apartment, and his pathological neatness and neuroticism ultimately infuriate Oscar into forcing him out of the apartment; a contributory factor of Oscar's disenchantment with Felix is the fact that Felix's crying over his separation from his wife and children caused Oscar to miss out on some welcome intercourse with the daffy, British Pigeon sisters -- Gwendolyn and Cecily -- who live in the same apartment building as Oscar and Felix. At play's end -- another poker game -- however, everything is rectified between Oscar and Felix. Felix will live with the Pigeon sisters (who find him "sensitive" and "fragile," and "the dearest thing I ever met") "just for a few days." And ex-slob Oscar's last words to the poker players -- the last words of the play -- are: "Then let's play poker. (Sharply, to the BOYS.) And watch your cigarettes, will you? This is my house, not a pig sty."⁴

The Odd Couple is a representational play written in the style of heightened realism. Its theme is the viability of human interaction: man will gain something of value from exposure to and communication with even the most opposite and most infuriating of his fellows. There are eight characters in the play. It is an ingenious inversion of the concept of domestic comedy. It is also a comedy of character.

³Neil Simon, The Odd Couple (New York: Samuel French, 1966), p. 32.

⁴Ibid., p. 90.

Next came The Star-Spangled Girl (1966). It is the only one of the first nine plays under consideration herein that does not take place in Manhattan, but it might as well, for the change of locale makes for no appreciable change in Simon's dramaturgy. The entire action of the play takes place in a duplex studio apartment in San Francisco. The play is in three acts, five scenes, and it covers about a week. The unities of place and action are observed.

The theme of The Star-Spangled Girl is the vagaries of human love. The play has only three characters: Norman Cornell, half-owner and sole author of an impoverished radical journal; Andy Hobart, owner of the other half, publisher, editor, and jack-of-all-trades for the journal; and all-American girl and Olympic swimmer Sophie Rauschmeyer, who moves in next door and changes their apparently cloistered lives. Norman falls in love with her at sight, or at smell, as it were, taken as he is by her smell; she does not love him and is at odds with his roommate, Andy; subsequently, she falls in love with Andy, becoming attracted by his smell; and, finally, Andy accepts and returns her love. The rift between Norman and Andy caused by this situation is healed at play's end, and the three energetically proceed to continue the publication of the journal.

The Star-Spangled Girl is a representational play written in heightened realism. It is another manifestation of the domestic comedy, in which Sophie at first threatens the domicile and the relatively harmonious home life of Norman and Andy, proceeds to reform it (at one point Andy hires her to work for them so that the then-lovesick Norman can be near her), and concludes by merging into it.

Simon's next comedy was the program of one-acters, Plaza Suite (1968). The theme is again the vagaries of human love, and the complex of human interactions proceeding from its pursuit. The play is in three acts.

The first playlet concerns the dissolution of a marriage after twenty-five years, and the attempts of the wife, Karen Nash, to salvage it by having the evening of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary spent in the same suite in which they spent their wedding night. Her husband, Sam, seems so preoccupied with his work that he even has his secretary, Miss McCormack, come to the suite that evening to discuss -- seemingly -- business. When she leaves, it is revealed that Sam is having an affair with her, and, at play's end, he leaves Karen -- for that night anyway -- to join Miss McCormack.

This is the first of Simon's Broadway plays (considering this one-acter as a self-contained play -- which it is -- in a program of one-acters) to have an ending that is decidedly not "happy." It is also the first of his plays to deal seriously with a serious human problem -- that of the loss of youth, and the loss of youth's dreams, goals, hopes, and achievements. Sam explains the disintegration of their marriage to Karen in very serious terms:

SAM: It's me Karen, not you.

KAREN: I'll buy that. What's wrong with you, Sam?

SAM: (There is a long pause)
I don't know . . . I don't know if you can understand this . . . but when I came home after the war . . . I had my whole life in front of me. And all I dreamed about, all I wanted, was to get married, and to have

children . . . and to make
 a success of my life . . .
 Well, I was very lucky . . .
 . I got it all . . .
 Marriage, the children . .
 . more money than I ever
 dreamed of making . . .

KAREN: Then what is it you want?

SAM: I just want to do it all
 over again . . . I would
 like to start the whole
 damned thing right from
 the beginning.⁵

But then, quickly, Karen undercuts this with the riposte, "I see. Well, frankly, Sam, I don't think the Navy will take you again,"⁶ and we are again back in the comedy world of Neil Simon, via his most thoroughgoing and most successful comic device -- the wisecrack.

It is tempting to conjecture that Karen and Sam Nash are Corie and Paul Bratter twenty-five years later.

The second playlet of Plaza Suite details the apparent seduction of Muriel Tate, a housewife from Tenafly, New Jersey, by her ex-boyfriend, and now famous Hollywood producer, Jesse Kiplinger. The subtlety of the writing leaves open to directorial and audience interpretation whether she has really been seduced or whether she had seduction as a goal of her own from the beginning to the same degree that Jesse did. I believe that this ambiguity exists throughout the scene in the mind of Muriel herself, and is never therein resolved, because her conscience and her sense of values refuse and could not bear the resolution.

⁵Neil Simon, Plaza Suite (New York: Samuel French, 1969), p. 36.

⁶Ibid.

The third playlet presents the plight of Norma and Roy Hubley: they cannot persuade their daughter Mimsey -- who is to be married in the "Green Room" of the hotel momentarily -- to unlock the bathroom door, come out, and go to her wedding. After temperamental outbursts by Roy, failed attempts at conciliation by Norma, and farcical physical exertions by both, the groom, Borden Eisler, persuades her to come out by saying, simply: "Mimsey? . . . This is Borden . . . Cool it!"⁷

As one-acters, these plays are almost constrained to observe the unities, and they do. As we have come to expect of Simon's work by now, these playlets respect the unities of place and action, but they are the first of Simon's plays -- because they are one-acters -- to observe the unity of time as well. Of course, as an overall play program for an evening, Plaza Suite observes only the unity of place, that unity being, in fact, its governing central device, and the motif binding the three plays together.

Each playlet is written in realistic style, and each is a representational piece. The first act requires four actors, the second only two, and the third only two, plus two virtual walk-ons -- Borden and Mimsey. Of course the same actor and actress play the leading roles in each playlet.

Plaza Suite presents three different types of comedies: the first playlet is a domestic comedy with a serious theme, the second is a comedy of character, and the third is a farcical domestic comedy.

⁷Ibid., p. 91.

Chronologically, the next comedy is Last of the Red Hot Lovers (1969). Unity of place is strictly observed: The action takes place in an apartment in New York's East Thirties. The unity of action is also followed, although it is segmented into three sub-actions: three failing seduction attempts by the forty-seven-year-old owner of a fish restaurant, Barney Cashman, whose original family name is Czernivekoski. Unity of time is again violated, as the three attempted seductions take place over a ten-month span.

Barney Cashman attempts three separate seductions in his mother's apartment while she is safely away, working at Mount Sinai Hospital. His first attempt, with sophisticated Elaine Navazio, fails because she is too confident and experienced for him. His second attempt, with hyperneurotic, masochistic "singer" Bobbi Michele, fails because she is too far-out for him. The third attempt, with his friend's wife, Jeanette Fisher, fails because she is too guilt-ridden, reticent and despondent for him. But, in effect, each attempt fails for the same reason, despite the considerable differences among the three women. The reason for his failures is Barney's inability, ultimately, to free himself from the upper-middle-class values and guilts he shares with his cultural peers -- Simon's target audience. Although there is the slightest trace in this of a criticism -- or at least of a questioning -- of these values, Simon reverts to form when, at play's end, Barney resignedly, but with the satisfying self-knowledge that this is the best thing he can do under the circumstances, calls his wife on the phone and invites her to his mother's apartment.

The theme of Last of the Red Hot Lovers is that for people like Barney domestic bliss and faithfulness are the best, and perhaps the only true roads to self-actualization.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers is a representational play written in the heightened realistic style. It has four characters. It is a comedy of character, with undertones of social comedy, and, it may also be viewed as a peculiarly mutant form of the domestic comedy, reaffirming, as it does, the ultimate sovereignty and hoped-for power of the contemporary domicile and of its representative values.

The next play of Simon's to appear on Broadway is The Gingerbread Lady (1970). The theme of this play is the regenerative power of love and the need for interdependence between people. The story concerns the homecoming of the once-popular pop singer Evy Meara from a ten-week stay at a "sanitarium for drunks" on Long Island. The action takes place in a brownstone apartment in New York's West Seventies, where Evy had been living alone, and, for a while, with itinerant guitar player Lou Tanner, before she underwent the cure. The play is separated into three acts.

The central thread of the plot is Evy's renewed flirtations with both alcohol and Lou Tanner, both of which lead her to disaster -- she becomes an inveterate alcoholic again. Instead of being able to help her, her two closest friends, Toby Landau and Jimmy Perry, compound her downfall by responding weakly to their own crises: Toby, to the assaults of age on her phobia about her beauty, and her husband's desire for a divorce; Jimmy, to the loss of a rare professional acting opportunity, and his ensuing realization that, at the age of forty, he is a failure in his chosen profession, and in life. Evy's brief sexual reunion with Lou is of no help to her either. But her saving grace is her seventeen-year-old daughter, Polly, who, after moving in with her mother because she wanted

to help Evy stay sober, and after having endured Evy's post-cure drunken outbursts, forces Evy to acknowledge the possibility of a hopeful future at play's end.

The Gingerbread Lady has six characters. It is written in the realistic style, and is a representational play. Once again the unities of place and action are observed while that of time is not. It is a comedy of character.

The next play is The Prisoner of Second Avenue (1971). The theme of this play is the breakdown of human existence, especially of big-city life, and especially of life in Manhattan. The action takes place in a Manhattan apartment, on Second Avenue, in the upper Eighties.

There are some deviations from Simon's by-now established style. This play has only two acts, comprised of five scenes. And the play is neither wholly representational nor written in any realistic style.

I believe that the play is written in the manner of impressionism: Simon is showing us his view of this decline of human life by presenting a highly selective -- and destructive -- sequence of events that is besetting his protagonist, Mel Edison. And Simon hammers home his point by using a Brechtian device to end scenes 1, 3, 4, and 5: "The stage goes black, then the curtain falls. The house remains in darkness. A screen drops and the News Logo appears. We hear Roger Keating with the Six O'Clock Report."⁸ Keating details the demise of the city, the state, the nation, the world, coherence, and nature, as they parallel the demise of the life of Mel Edison. It is reminiscent of the Elizabethan theory of "the great chain of being."

⁸ Neil Simon, The Prisoner of Second Avenue (New York, Samuel French, 1972), p. 17.

The Prisoner of Second Avenue is a six-character play. For the first three scenes, Mel and his wife, Edna, are alone onstage, and besieged -- or so it appears -- by the entire cosmos. In the fourth scene, Mel's brother, Harry, and his sisters, Pearl, Jessie and Pauline, come to the apartment to try to help Edna resuscitate him from the total breakdown which the demise of his fortunes has wrought upon him. Nothing is rectified by this meeting. In scene five Harry returns to the apartment alone -- as spokesman for himself and the sisters -- to offer Mel whatever financial aid he requires. Mel declines any help. At play's end, while Mel seems to have reached a new level of equanimity and is beginning to accept the wretched state of human life, Edna, who has been relatively strong and supportive of him throughout, begins to show signs of disintegration.

The Prisoner of Second Avenue is black comedy at its blackest. It presages the doom of the world at any moment. It illustrates admirably J. L. Styan's definition of comic irony: "Mixing the positive image of a character wishing to be and assert himself with another aspect of necessity's power to destroy -- its power to belittle and undermine by suggesting commonplaceness and triviality."⁹ It is also reflective of the following comments on modern comedy (he calls it "comic tragedy"¹⁰) by Styan:

. . . ours is a disputatious drama,
making an argument of itself, taking nothing
on trust;¹¹

⁹J.L. Styan, The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 41.

¹⁰Ibid., title. ¹¹Ibid., p. 283.

Troubled himself, the modern dramatist is intent on troubling the spectator, and his handiest device has been to thrust remorselessly together the laughter and tears;¹²

Neutralizing the pathetic with the comic and vice versa grows to be the sharpest weapon of the twentieth century dramatist;¹³

The dramatist who can swing between the extremes of tragedy and farce within the same framework is today the man to sting us. Nevertheless, if he is not to drive the audience to distraction by offering a drama too inharmonious to be acceptable, he must of course have a sense of the unity of his piece.¹⁴

Cyrus Hoy would call The Prisoner of Second Avenue a tragicomedy, and would argue effectively for that point of view by citing the following passage written by him:

What our argument comes to, then, is this: that in serious drama, comic or tragic, we are confronted with what is, at bottom, a single truth about the human condition. Man is possessed of an ideal of human conduct, but circumstances together with his own inherent failings conspire to make the belief that the ideal can be fulfilled a finally illusory one. But man persists in despite of all the odds, and in his persistence he may appear as nobly enduring, stubbornly unyielding, foolishly blind, or a combination of all three. The more forcibly and apparently these diverse qualities are linked in combination, the more surely sounds the note of tragicomedy.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., p. 281. ¹³Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 274-275.

¹⁵Cyrus Hoy, The Hyacinth Room: An Investigation into the Nature of Comedy, Tragedy and Tragicomedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 11.

It is clear that The Prisoner of Second Avenue very definitely picks up the thread of seriousness that Simon began with the first playlet of Plaza Suite and continued ever so subtly in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, and more apparently in The Gingerbread Lady. In The Prisoner of Second Avenue Simon is still writing to and for his target audience -- he is voicing a viewpoint and depicting experiences they share -- but he is not hedging the issue of the ultimate possibility of darkness for this play as he had hedged with earlier ones, with the exception of the first playlet of Plaza Suite, and, to some extent, The Gingerbread Lady. If we consider The Prisoner of Second Avenue as a possible tragicomedy, we may consider it Neil Simon's Waiting for Godot in its comedic confrontation of the tragedy of human existence.

Simon quickly abandons this strain of seriousness with his next play, The Sunshine Boys (1972). This is, in part, a tribute to vaudeville comedy, but it is, in fact, a comedy of character. The theme of the play is not the irascibility of old age, but, rather, the irascibility of once-inseparable friends and working partners toward each other, based upon the dim but forceful memory of both perpetrated and imagined slights, insults, and offenses. The Sunshine Boys tells the story of the unsuccessful efforts of agent Ben Silverman to reunite the fabled vaudeville comedy team of Al Lewis and Willie Clark (Ben's uncle), "The Sunshine Boys," for one last appearance on a televised comedy special. Clark bears malice toward Lewis for having quit the act eleven years ago, after their forty-three years together, and for various other personal idiosyncracies that Clark now claims disrupted his concentration and affronted his sensibilities when they were doing their act. Their

attempt at a reunion causes Clark to have a heart attack. He makes Lewis pay dearly for the chance to apologize, and, at play's end, both are as irascible and argumentative as ever.

For the first time in his dramaturgy Simon violates the unity of place in The Sunshine Boys. It is again a two-act play. The two scenes of Act One take place in a small apartment in an old hotel on upper Broadway, in the mid-Eighties, as does the second (and final) scene of Act Two; but Scene One of Act Two takes place in a television studio in Manhattan. This is his second consecutive play to be comprised of only two acts. The unity of time is, as in his previous plays, unheeded.

The action is unified, although it is not as tight as in other of his plays, including as it does a considerable part of Lewis and Clark's sketch, "The Doctor and the Tax Examination," for its own sake, as a comic set-piece, and as a comedic illustration of the partners' irascibility toward each other in the formal setting of their lifetimes' work.

The Sunshine Boys is a representational play, but it is highly selective, showmanlike representationalism. The language is one of highly selective realism. The play uses seven characters, and the offstage voices of the television show director and his assistant.

Simon's next nonmusical stage play was The Good Doctor (1973). This play exhibits most conclusively the various manifestations of the struggle for personal power which I believe to be the fundamental motif of Simon's dramaturgy. However, it will not be considered in detail in this chapter, or in this study, for the following reasons:

Unlike all other of Simon's stage comedies to date, The Good Doctor is not original but adapted from some short

stories by Chekov, and it is representative of Simon's dramaturgy only in its rendering of the struggle for personal power as comedy, but not in terms of its structure, setting, characters, and language; it is far too reliant upon the short stories of Chekov to be considered an original Simon script and may, in fact, given the rest of Simon's dramaturgy, be considered a series of exercises rather than a unified play. The Good Doctor is akin to Simon's musical plays in that it is, in effect, a collaborative effort, the creative, if not the motivational, impetus of which comes, in fact, from Chekov. It is the only nonmusical play of Simon's that is not set in a time contemporary with Simon's writing of it; it is, in fact, called "a new comedy with music," with a "concert" by Peter Link preceding the play. It is the only one of his plays that is not set in the United States, and, in fact, excluding The Star-Spangled Girl and California Suite, the only one not set in the state of New York, within twenty miles of New York City. Aside from Victor Velasco in Barefoot in the Park, and Manuel, the delivery boy in The Gingerbread Lady, all of Simon's stage characters, except for those in The Good Doctor, have English as their native language; and, aside from the aforementioned Victor Velasco and Manuel, and the Pigeon sisters in The Odd Couple, and Sidney and Diana Nichols in the third playlet of California Suite, the characters in The Good Doctor are the only non-native American characters Simon has created (or, in this case, adapted) for the stage.

The Good Doctor is comprised of eleven scenes presented in two acts (six scenes in the first act, five scenes in the second act); it is held together by two threads; the theme of the struggle for power in interpersonal relationships (and within oneself), and the use of "The Writer" as

a narrator throughout the play. Each scene presents characters independent of and unrelated to those in the other scenes, except for "The Writer," who appears as himself in Scene One of Act One, and in scenes One, Two, and Five of Act Two, and as various other characters throughout the play, including the portrayal of his own father in Scene Four of Act Two.

The Good Doctor is an episodic play, with its various scenes representing various forms of comedy. The language of the play is an uneasy alliance between Simon's attempted use of Chekovian subtlety and his seemingly effortless use of his own mode of writing. The reader is urged to study this play on his own to discover its experimental nature and to contrast it to the main body of Simon's dramaturgy.

The next Broadway comedy of Simon's is God's Favorite (1974), a contemporary retelling of the story of Job. To date, it is the only one of Simon's plays set in New York that does not take place in Manhattan. Its protagonist, Joe Benjamin, his wife, two sons, one daughter, and two black servants, live in a "palatial" mansion on Oyster Bay, on the North Shore of Long Island. Simon seeks to escape representationalism and realism, and he attempts to give universal scope and relevance to his play, by describing the set as follows: "The design of the living room is stylized. It is today, and yet it has a feeling of timelessness. Wooden-beamed ceilings seem to stretch up to heaven itself."¹⁶ (Vague echoes of The Skin of Our Teeth?)

¹⁶Neil Simon, God's Favorite (New York: Samuel French, 1975), p. 3.

The theme of God's Favorite is that man can survive and even triumph over all obstacles and pain through faith. It is a two-act play, the first act consisting of two scenes, the second of one.

The plot of God's Favorite is the testing of Joe Benjamin's expository often-stated "faith in God." Joe Benjamin was the child of a very poor family that lived in the tenements of New York City, but he became extremely wealthy by owning a factory that manufactured corrugated boxes. His faith is tested by the visitations upon him of fire (first, his factory is burned to the ground, then, later, his home), extreme cold (it is freezing in his home throughout Scene Two of Act One), a torturous itch, neuralgia, bursitis, tennis elbow (let us remember that this is comedy), hemorrhoids (for a first-act curtain!), chapped lips, premature aging, thoroughgoing, agonizing bodily pain, a nail in his shoe, a self-inflicted tongue bite, abandonment by his family, and the temporary blindness of his oldest, and most valued, child, David; however, he does not waver in his faith, and at play's end his test is over and he is triumphantly restored to himself and lovingly reconciled with the previously rebellious, drunken, sarcastic David, who now accepts and assumes Joe's faith and the filial and family role his father wanted him to assume all along.

The "messenger" of God who informs Joe of his trials and sees him through them is Sidney Lipton, a coy, fey, arch, and unbearable neurotic, especially as he must have been played by the inimitable Charles Nelson Reilly in the original Broadway production. Rarely has a role been so well-tailored by a playwright for a particular actor to make use of just those prominent aspects of the actor's personality

that make him unattractive to an audience in the first place.

The unities of place and action are again observed in God's Favorite, while the unity of time again is not (Joe's test lasts almost three weeks). The play calls for eight actors. It is a comedy of character, and it includes elements of domestic comedy and farce. God's Favorite is a presentational play requiring imaginative design and execution of sets; it has the element of spectacle as an integral part of its essence to a far greater extent than any other of Simon's nonmusical stage plays.

The program of four playlets, in two acts of two scenes each, California Suite (1976), was Simon's next Broadway offering. It recalls Plaza Suite in its use of an elegant hotel room as the setting for, in this case, four different playlets involving four different sets of characters. The first of these playlets not only echoes the seriousness of the first segment of Plaza Suite, but it also presents some of Simon's amusing perceptions of the dichotomy between life in New York and life in California. It concerns the meeting between former husband and wife (to each other), William ("Billy") and Hannah Warren, to discuss with which one of them their seventeen-year-old daughter shall live. Billy left New York for a career as a screenwriter in Hollywood, while Hannah remained in New York. Their verbal exchanges are funny, pointed and witty. They provide excellent foils for each other, and they are an intellectual counterpart to Felix and Oscar in their amusing incompatibility.

In this playlet Simon has created a verbal comedy, a comedy of wit, a type of high comedy reminiscent in an American accent of the work of Noel Coward.

Simon has created Hannah Warren to be the "intelligent and sophisticated woman"¹⁷ he describes her as at play's beginning. She is given piquant lines such as, "I don't have a life-style. I have a life."¹⁸ She continues the line of interesting women characters Simon has created, from Corie Bratter in Barefoot in the Park to Evy Meara in The Gingerbread Lady, and through to Jennie Malone in Chapter Two.

The second playlet of California Suite dives headlong into farce. It details the frenetic but ultimately failed efforts of Marvin Michaels to hide, from his wife, Millie, the girl with whom he slept the night before in their suite at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Millie arrives from Philadelphia (Marvin insisted that they take separate planes) just in time to ignite the farcical complications that ensue in Marvin's efforts to hide the hungover, immobilized young lady who remains in the bed throughout. Although it was Marvin's younger brother, Harry (for whose son's bar mitzvah they have come to Los Angeles), who provided his sleeping "gift," and although Marvin recalls nothing pleasant about the night (in fact, he recalls nothing at all about it), Millie is suitably shocked and offended at "the humiliation of lying in bed next to a sleeping hooker and telling you I've got my period!"¹⁹ There is an uneasy reconciliation between husband and wife at scene's end.

The first scene of the second act again involves two witty, intelligent, and, in this case, still married, antagonists who participate in a verbal comedy. Diana Nichols is

¹⁷Neil Simon, California Suite (New York: Samuel French, 1977), p. 3.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 20. ¹⁹Ibid., pp. 51-52.

a British actress who has come to Los Angeles to attend the Academy Awards; she has been nominated as best actress in a leading role. She shares the suite with her bisexual husband, Sidney, an antiques dealer in London. This playlet is divided into two scenes; the second scene details their return to the suite after Diana's failure to win the award; it also further chronicles their sardonic backbiting, uneasy alliance, and profound yet peculiar need for each other. Echoes of Noel Coward are again heard in this playlet (this time with Simon's version of British English). And Diana Nichols is still another considerable female character etched by Simon.

The final playlet of California Suite is again an unmitigated farce; in it, Mort and Beth Hollender and Stu and Gert Franklyn, friends who have been on vacation with each other for three weeks, express, both verbally and physically, their pent-up hostilities toward each other, couple against couple. Each one of them becomes physically injured in one way or another in the ensuing snowballing of accidents, physical combat, and the deterioration of friendship and sanity. The piece concludes with the indefinite resolution of each character having become physically depleted yet hypertense.

Simon's alternation of verbal comedy with farce in California Suite is unique in his dramaturgy to date; it seems to have no sense of order and leaves one with a peculiar feeling of incompleteness. Despite the fact that each playlet fulfills itself (except for the suspended, unsatisfactory ending of the final one), and satisfies the requirements of the particular form of comedy which it represents, the total play has no unified impact and leaves no sense of coherent unity.

Simon's final stage play to be performed and published as of this writing is the distinctly autobiographical Chapter Two (1977). He, in fact, dedicates it to his second wife, Marsha Mason. It is unique in his dramaturgy in that the set consists of two separate apartments, between which the action alternates, and in that it is his first nonmusical stage comedy with a distinct subplot. Unity of action, therefore, is foregone; the play portrays two actions: the two very different types of romances, between George Schneider and Jennie Malone on the one hand, and between George's married brother, Leo, and Jennie's married friend, Faye Medwick, on the other. The unity of time is again disregarded: "The play begins on a late February afternoon and continues through to midspring."²⁰

Chapter Two brings us back to Manhattan once again: Simon describes the play's split set as follows:

The set consists of two separate apartments on opposite sides of Manhattan -- GEORGE SCHNEIDER lives in one; JENNIE MALONE, in the other.

His apartment, stage left, is located in the mid-Seventies on Central Park West. It is one of New York's older buildings, and the ceilings and rooms are higher and larger than the smaller, flatter, uninteresting boxes they build today.

Hers is one of the smaller, flatter, uninteresting boxes they build today. It is in the upper Eighties off Third Avenue.

His is decorated in a traditional, comfortable style -- large inviting arm-chairs, bookcases from floor to ceiling, lots of personal photographs of him and his wife.

Hers is modern, bright, attractive and cheerful. That's because she is.²¹

²⁰Neil Simon, Chapter Two (New York: Random House, 1978), front of sixth leaf, entitled, "The Scene," no pagination.

²¹Ibid., p. 3.

George is a financially successful author of spy novels; Jennie is an actress who works primarily in soap operas.

Chapter Two is well-structured in its intermingling of the plot and subplot, and in its use of the split set; however, it is somewhat overlong. It is in two acts of nine scenes each. The early courtship of George and Jennie is charmingly depicted, providing, as it does, an object lesson in the effective use of the telephone as a playwriting tool. (See the Appendix for a discussion of the use of the telephone in Simon's plays.) The plot of the George/Jennie romance hinges on George's inability to accept the wonderful new woman in his life, because he cannot accept the recent death of his treasured first wife, Barbara, with whom he had a near-perfect life for twelve years, and because he is afraid to invest himself in another potentially heartbreaking romance, or in any romance at all. Their relationship, after much vacillation and trauma on George's part and equally much steadfastness and faith on Jennie's, is resolved triumphantly for both characters and audience -- George and Jennie will try, and, it appears, will succeed in their effort to live as a loving married couple. The Leo/Faye affair, on the other hand, is never consummated, but of course, neither does it mean as much to the participants or to the audience as the romance between George and Jennie. The pragmatism and sometimes broad humor of the Leo/Faye relationship balances the occasional sweetness and everpresent seriousness of the George/Jennie one.

Chapter Two is a romantic comedy. Its theme is the limitless desire and potential for love within people, although, in this play, that desire and potential are ful-

filled for George and Jennie but frustrated for Leo and Faye; the need for love is also charming and ultimately triumphant for George and Jennie, while it is sardonic and bittersweet for Leo and Faye.

Chapter Two is a play written in the style of selective realism, and, except for the division of the stage into two sets, it is a representational play. In this play Simon's use of language is more subdued than usual; the wisecracks, although many, are nevertheless less plentiful than usual; the verbal tone of the play is more muted than in his previous efforts. Chapter Two obviously represents an autobiographical episode he respects and values.

There are some rather obvious observations to be made about the dramatic action in the foregoing twelve plays (excluding The Good Doctor from this consideration) by Neil Simon. Perhaps the most thoroughgoing traits of his dramaturgy derive from his considerable experience in writing for television. I cite the following obvious carryovers from television writing: almost always just one set (only The Sunshine Boys has more -- it has two, the second one being, interestingly, a television studio, while Chapter Two has a split set, a staging technique often used in television), small casts, intimate plays about middle-class and upper-middle-class people, the distinctive one-liners and wisecracks, affirmation of the target audience's values, tight, well-structured plays (required in television because of rigid time limitations), and, for the same reason, almost immediate exposition and foreshadowing (which is also a trait of most stage comedy).

Simon's manipulation of real time in his plays may also be attributed to his television-writing experience: there are no major time gaps in his plays, but there are brief lapses of time, anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. This is how many television scripts were written in the 1950s, the period when Simon was writing for television consistently: strict adherence to the unities of place and action -- for economic, scheduling and technical reasons -- and not-so-strict adherence, but no gargantuan violations of, to the unity of time.

The most outstanding element of comedy in the comedies of Neil Simon is the verbal element: not only can -- and do -- his characters deliver bons mots, puns, jests, witticisms, insults, toppers, comebacks, jokes at the expense of others, but Simon has a genius for structuring, phrasing, highlighting, and getting the most out of verbal humor on the stage.

Aside from their individual classifications as forms of comedy, most of Simon's plays are also, in a way, "comedies of manners" of the upper-middle and middle classes of New York City because they reflect, by their use of language, the society they portray. Just as all the characters of Wycherley are capable of speaking jestingly -- and try to, and do -- so too do the characters of Simon. The characters in Neil Simon's comedy are oppressed enough by life and by their own limitations to strike back with the Hecht-MacArthur and Kaufman popularized wise-guy remark or putdown; and, because Simon has created them, to strike back successfully, if only temporarily, and if only on the verbal level.

In the course of the thirteen plays detailed herein, Simon journeys from the casually autobiographical Come Blow Your Horn to the intimately autobiographical Chapter Two. He also develops a mastery of the comedic one-act play in writing Plaza Suite and California Suite, as well as in the individual acts of Last of the Red Hot Lovers. He writes a play that he considers little more than an artificial vehicle and a tool for improving his craft as a playwright, The Star-Spangled Girl:

Of those who dislike it, I head the list. It was all manufactured and my instincts were to quit. I didn't even enjoy going to the typewriter in the morning. All the other plays flowed.²²

I know that I could go on for many, many years writing funny and successful comedies . . . not that they would necessarily all be good, because Star-Spangled Girl certainly wasn't.

I got no fun out of it. And I think it was false in that I chose to say that their physical attraction would win out over their intellectual dislike. In real life, I think, they might have had a brief physical relationship, but their intellectual differences would have been dominant.

. . . I'm not ashamed of that play. I learned more about myself and writing and what's good and what's bad from it.²³

He writes an adaptation from some short stories by Chekov (The Good Doctor), and he writes a play that is, in large

²²Gerald Nachman, "Neil Simon, Good Humor Man," New York Daily News, Jan. 13, 1972, no pag.

²³Joan Barthel, "Life for Simon -- Not That Simple," New York Times, Sunday, Feb. 25, 1968, p. 9.

part, a tribute to vaudeville comedy (The Sunshine Boys). He also, as has been mentioned, creates some excellent female characters, as well as, this author believes, creating the complementarily archetypal comic characters, Felix and Oscar, in The Odd Couple.

The culmination of his nonmusical dramaturgy to this point is twofold. In The Prisoner of Second Avenue he has reached a degree of seriousness, of black humor, of the comingling of the comedic and potentially tragic in contemporary dramaturgy, that is of great interest for its own sake, and as a representation and continuation of the strain of seriousness in some of his work, and as a strikingly complementary contrast to the rest of his work. And, in The Odd Couple he has achieved a quality and balance of characterization, situation, relationship, structure, and use of language -- of idea and execution -- that makes The Odd Couple a striking and excellent example of how to write comedy, and of what comedy is: The Odd Couple is indubitably a comedy, yet it is inimitable in its essence as a comedy.

Knowing these plays as we now do, let us journey through them, with the aid of some of the foremost theorists of comedy, to see how each of them depicts the struggle for personal power as contemporary comedy.

CHAPTER III:

THE "COMIC OEDIPUS SITUATION"

Like a dutiful playwriting student, Neil Simon based his first stage comedy upon his personal experience, upon what he knew best, upon his most profound and immediate influences, upon the people with whom he was most familiar -- he wrote about himself and his family. And, with occasional exceptions (The Star-Spangled Girl, The Gingerbread Lady) and occasional variations (Last of the Red Hot Lovers, The Sunshine Boys), he has remained faithful to the dictum about writing plays derived from his own experience or the experiences of those who are close to him. In both subject matter and tone, Simon's plays are much closer to those of Menander than to those of Aristophanes -- intimate comedy rather than satire; much of his work is domestic comedy in the Menandrine mold. (A domestic comedy is one that deals with a domicile and its inhabitants; it is a comedy revolving around the members of a family, and their interrelationships.) Walter Kerr has said that, ". . . a case could be made that Neil Simon was simply buying out Menander's shop, good will and all. (I have a sneaking feeling that he may be better than Menander . . .)"¹ I do not know whether the comparison of quality is fair to Menander, since not all of his plays are extant, but I do feel that a degree of similarity may be

¹Walter Kerr, "What Simon Says," New York Times Magazine, Mar. 22, 1976, p. 16.

found between the comedies of Menander and Simon stemming from what Kerr calls "good will," and resulting in domestic comedies that reflect and do not challenge the values of their chosen audiences.

Of course, the struggle for power between child and parent is as old as the conflict between Cain and Adam, or, perhaps as old as the uneasy relationship between Adam and his Maker. Neil Simon's first full-length stage comedy, Come Blow Your Horn, details the paradoxical struggle between the maturing (and ultimately matured) child and the temporarily protective parent; it is paradoxical because the child wants both to break the bonds and to remain protected, while the parent wants both to protect the child and to send him out into the world on his own, all at the same time. The parent wants to spare his child the very pain of growing up into which he knows he must ultimately thrust him. From this conflict, both internal and external, and from its attendant paradoxes, can come tragedy, and, as Northrop Frye has observed, comedy as well. Professor Frye, in his instructive essay, "The Argument of Comedy," maintains that:

. . . today, when we speak of comedy, we normally think of something that derives from the Menandrine tradition.

New Comedy unfolds from what may be described as a comic Oedipus situation. Its main theme is the successful effort of a young man to outwit an opponent and possess the girl of his choice. The opponent is usually the father (senex), and the psychological descent of the heroine from the mother is also sometimes hinted at. . . . Whether this analysis is sound or not, New Comedy is certainly concerned with the maneuvering of a young man toward a young

woman, and marriage is the tonic chord on which it ends. The normal comic resolution is the surrender of the senex to the hero, never the reverse.²

The term "comic Oedipus situation" is, like the term "Oedipus complex," a critical misnomer, for it fails to take into account both the fact that the comic hero usually attempts to overthrow his father consciously while Oedipus killed his father and married his mother unknowingly, and that, in fact, Oedipus tried all that was in his conscious power to avoid the tragedy into which he was ultimately thrust.

Interestingly, too, in many contemporary comedies, including Come Blow Your Horn, it is the young hero who concedes to the senex at play's end, the senex representing the social norm of the audience for which the play has been written. This does not at all invalidate Professor Frye's theory, but merely gives it an interestingly conservative contemporary twist. We shall discuss this reversal in greater detail later.

Given an understanding of the above points, let us examine the application of Professor Frye's theory of comedy to the stage comedies of Neil Simon.

This "comic Oedipal situation" is also the disguised thematic core of the farcical third playlet of Plaza Suite, and it is the secondary, but essential, theme of God's Favorite. It also has an interesting, if indirect and subtle, relevance to the development and ending of the situation in The Gingerbread Lady, wherein, at play's end,

²Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," English Institute Essays, edited by D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 57-58.

the daughter, Polly, has assumed the role of being mother to her mother, the protagonist, Evy Meara; in fact, the last line of the play is Evy saying to Polly: "When I grow up, I want to be just like you."³

Let us first examine Professor Frye's theory in detail, and then let us consider its application to the above-named stage comedies of Neil Simon, not in order to prove that Simon's work adheres to or derives from any one theory of comedy, but, rather, to show that his first stage comedy, and aspects of some of his others, follow tendencies of comedy that, in Professor Frye's opinion, constitute the major thread of comic dramaturgy from the time of Menander to the present. Having done this, we will have provided the groundwork for the substance of this study: the demonstration of the assertion that although no one theory of comedy is comprehensive enough to encompass this challenging, difficult and multifarious genre, and that although Simon's work does not adhere to any one particular theory of comedy, and that, in fact, although he was not following theory when he was creating comedy but rather simply creating comedy, all of his work nevertheless comes neither from a vacuum nor full-blown from his brow, but rather from an understandable, explicable and perceptible history of comedy and comedy theory, and that it is encompassed by and reflected in the spectrum of important contemporary and historically significant works and theories of comedy. Simon has not been constructing comedies from the erector set of comedy theory; but neither is he an idiot savant who has been writing comedies

³Neil Simon, The Gingerbread Lady
(New York: Samuel French, 1971), p. 81.

ignorant of the history and theories of the genre. Comedy theory and the history of comedy have influenced his work, if not always consciously and immediately, and, in fact, sometimes indirectly, remotely, or subliminally. He might not even know Professor Frye's theory, and he is most likely not writing under its direct influence, but his work is part of the same cultural tradition which Professor Frye's theory encompasses.

Professor Frye maintains that,

New Comedy has the blessing of Aristotle, who greatly preferred it to its predecessor, and it exhibits the general pattern of Aristotelian causation. It has a material cause in the young man's sexual desire, and a formal cause in the social order represented by the senex, with which the hero comes to terms when he gratifies his desire. It has an efficient cause in the character who brings about the final situation. In classical times the character is a tricky slave; Renaissance dramatists often use some adaptation of the medieval 'vice'; modern writers generally like to pretend that nature, or at least the natural course of events, is the efficient cause. The final cause is the audience, which is expected by its applause to take part in the comic resolution. All this takes place on a single order of existence. The action of New Comedy tends to become probable rather than fantastic, and it moves toward realism and away from myth and romance.⁴

Come Blow Your Horn follows this pattern almost exactly, and interestingly, because the "efficient cause" is constituted by all the characters to different degrees, as

⁴Frye, pp. 58-59.

they enact and, seemingly, promote the "natural course of events" in the life of the Baker family as Simon's chosen audience would perceive it and would want it. The material cause is Alan's sexual desire; the formal cause is the social order represented by his father. It is interesting that Alan, at the age of thirty-three, is considered young enough in contemporary society to represent the same dramatic entity that in earlier periods was designated as a boy in his teens; as the average life-span of people increases, and as societies change, definitions of youth, maturity, and passage into adulthood change as well.

When Professor Frye says that, "the average movie of today is a rigidly conventionalized New Comedy proceeding toward an act which, like death in a Greek tragedy, takes place offstage, and is symbolized by the final embrace,"⁵ he is describing not only the average movie of today but also much of contemporary comedy, and he is, unknowingly of course, stating precisely what happens in Come Blow Your Horn.

The foremost total reversal of an important aspect of Frye's theory is the one mentioned earlier: that, in Come Blow Your Horn, and in other contemporary comedies, it is the male ingenue who capitulates to the senex (who is almost always his father), and to the morals and values of the senex, those morals and values representing the morals and values of the playwright's chosen audience. In this respect, as stated above, Simon is, philosophically, very much like his contemporaries and Menander and very much unlike Aristophanes: he chooses not to challenge the

⁵Ibid., p. 59.

audience but to comfort it and justify itself to itself via its onstage representatives. Of course the end of Come Blow Your Horn does indeed assert the forthcoming marriage of Alan and Connie and its accompanying komos as manifested by the contemporary concept of a "wedding reception."

Comedy is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge. It finds the virtues of Malvolio and Angelo as comic as the vices of Shylock.

The essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. The normal individual is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous individuals. The Oedipus patterns we noted in New Comedy belongs to the individual side of this, and the sense of the ridiculousness of the humor to the social side. But all real comedy is based on the principle that these two forms of release are ultimately the same.⁶

In the above passage, Professor Frye might well be describing the essential theme of Come Blow Your Horn. In the instance of Come Blow Your Horn, the normal individual and the humorous individual who lacks self-knowledge is one and the same person: it is Alan Baker. Come Blow Your Horn is a play that details his coming of age; and, by extension, it is a representation to Simon's chosen audience of those "young" men in their society who have not "grown up" and have not dismissed the "humor" of being "immature" until they reach the self-knowledge that Alan does at the end of Come Blow Your Horn, that self-knowledge being the socially pacific notion that he must take his place in the established order and be a "man" in the sense dictated and found acceptable by

⁶Ibid., pp. 60-61.

his parents and his society. The audience is tacitly assured at play's end that Buddy Baker, although seized during the past three weeks and for some time to come by the same "humorous" lack of self-actualization that previously plagued his older brother Alan, will come to his societally-acceptable senses eventually.

Professor Frye maintains that "the moral quality of the society presented is not the point of the comic resolution,"⁷ and, in terms of Come Blow Your Horn he is correct. The morality of the society represented by Simon in Come Blow Your Horn is not under discussion in the play: it is assumed to be good, valid and functional. Its attendant values are mocked occasionally like a beloved uncle whose peculiar idiosyncracies make him all the more lovable, but its fundamental rightness and ineradicability are never questioned or doubted.

Frye then says that, "the resolution of New Comedy seems to be a realistic foreshortening of a death-and-resurrection pattern, in which the struggle and rebirth of a divine hero has shrunk into a marriage, the freeing of a slave, and the triumph of a young man over an older one."⁸ This pattern is followed, with the critical exception noted above, in Come Blow Your Horn. The young, irresponsible, socially-unacceptable Alan dies, but is resurrected as the older, wiser, socially-acceptable Alan; he has become a "normal" adult male in terms of the mundane world in which he, Simon, and Simon's audience live; he will marry, work, and undoubtedly sire children, thereby continuing the socially-acceptable pattern of life. There is indeed a slave,

⁷Ibid., p. 61. ⁸Ibid., pp. 64-65.

a scheming, plotting slave, freed in Come Blow Your Horn: it is Alan himself, freed from his immaturity and hedonism into the workaday world shared by Simon and his audience. No longer will Alan Baker be a social misfit; rather, he will become the exemplum of the opposite of what he once was: he will become his father at some future time; he will become intolerant of people who live the way he once did; this intolerance is suggested by his behavior towards Buddy near the play's end. In gaining his "maturity" and his social acceptability, Alan may lose humanity, spontaneity, and joie-de-vivre. He will become like his father, and resent those who are like his youthful self once was. In this cyclical development and suggested future of Alan Baker is the rhythmical continuation, the incessant rhythmical continuation of life represented in comedy that is the crux of Susanne Langer's theory of comedy, a theory that will be discussed later in this study.

As was stated earlier, the deviation from Frye's theory in Come Blow Your Horn is of course that Alan does not "triumph" over his father. He supplants him in business, yes, and will someday take his father's place socially, yes, but it is his father and the society his father represents that ultimately triumph in Come Blow Your Horn. They triumph, paradoxically, because in Alan's very act of supplanting his father in business is the ineluctable social "law" which they want him to obey and which he had succeeded in avoiding and disregarding for thirty-three years.

The essence, then, of Come Blow Your Horn is the struggle between the senex (the Father, referred to by that designation in the script) and the hero (Alan); the Father represents age, society, responsibility, work, and the societal "norm" of Simon's chosen audience; in opposition,

Alan represents youth, the individual, irresponsibility, pleasure, and the eccentricity attendant on the aforementioned qualities as far as Simon's chosen audience is concerned. The triumph of the senex and of all he represents is not at all demoralizing to the hero, because Simon intimates throughout the play, and especially toward play's end, that Alan had the "right" instincts within himself all along. For example, he starts to see the error of his previous ways reflected in the behavior of his brother, Buddy, toward whom he ultimately comes to behave much as his father behaved toward him; also, and more importantly, Alan clings to the then-conventional (1961) notion that his future wife will have to be a virgin. Connie Dayton, who is to become his wife immediately after the play's final curtain, is in fact the extension of the "Mother" in Come Blow Your Horn, in keeping with Northrop Frye's theory of comedy, in that Simon represents her throughout the play as the "good girl" geared for marriage. She immediately ingratiates herself with Alan's parents at play's end when she meets them for the first time; and she is instrumental in allowing the audience to perceive Alan's basic (conventional) value system, when she pretends to accept his invitation to sleep at his apartment, forcing him to confront his inability to accept her acceptance:

(Doorbell rings . . . Connie stands there with valise.)

ALAN: Connie! (Closes door. She puts down case and gives ALAN a long kiss interrupting his "Wha-," then when she releases him.)

CONNIE: Me no Connie. Me Jane. You Tarzan. Jane come to swing with Tarzan in tree.

ALAN: What's in that suitcase?

CONNIE: The rest of my merchandise.
(She takes off her coat . . .)

ALAN: Are you drunk?

CONNIE: On one martini?

ALAN: You get loaded just ordering one.

CONNIE: Now, then, the bedroom. It's
in that direction, isn't it?
(She picks up suitcase and
starts for bedroom.)

ALAN: You stay out of there. What's
come over you?

CONNIE: Nothing, darling. I gave you
a choice and you made it.

ALAN: What?

CONNIE: Wonderful service, isn't it?
You don't even have to pick
it up. We deliver.

ALAN: You're not drunk. You're crazy.

CONNIE: (Puts down suitcase and
crosses R., stalking him as
he backs away R.) Just
think of it, darling! We're
going to live together, love
together. Fun, fun, fun.
Sin, sin, sin.

ALAN: Connie, you're scaring the
hell out of me.

CONNIE: You don't even have to say
you love me. And when you
get bored, just kick me out
and give me a letter of
recommendation.

ALAN: Will you cut it out? It's not funny sny more.

CONNIE: I don't understand, Alan.
Isn't this what you want?
Isn't this what you asked for?

ALAN: No.

CONNIE: No.

ALAN: That's right, no. I said I could see nothing wrong for two young people who were very fond of each other to have a healthy, normal relationship. But I see no reason to turn this affair into a -- foreign art movie.

CONNIE: Good heavens, sir. I must be in the wrong apartment.

ALAN: Look, I told you before. I'm not denying anything. Six nights a week I'm Leonard Lover. But with you -- well, you're different.

CONNIE: Careful, Alan. You're on the brink of committing yourself.

ALAN: Who's keeping it a secret? I love you.

CONNIE: You weren't very sure.

ALAN: I am now. If I can turn down an offer like this with a girl like you, I must be in love.⁹

⁹Neil Simon, Come Blow Your Horn (New York: Samuel French, 1962), pp. 60-61.

Come Blow Your Horn represents, reveals, and foreshadows many of the dominant patterns of Simon's work. As has already been mentioned, the play is set in New York City; in it he writes about himself and his family; he writes for a particular audience; and he portrays a struggle for personal power as contemporary comedy. In Come Blow Your Horn he also introduces some of his other playwriting tendencies by writing about upper-middle-class New York Jews, by using their mode of speech for his distinctive style of dialogue,¹⁰ and by using the wisecrack, the one-liner, and the reference to contemporary phenomena that are to become his subsequent trademarks; these tendencies will be discussed at greater length throughout this study.

It is informative to note that Come Blow Your Horn continues, in a comedic vein, the tradition of the dramatic exploration of the New York family in the American theater, a tradition that includes Clifford Odets' Awake and Sing and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. In all of these plays, including Come Blow Your Horn, the unity, and in fact the very viability and vitality of the family is threatened by internal dispute, but emerges triumphant and stronger than ever at play's end, even when death is the price required to solidify its fiber (as in Death of a Salesman). Interestingly, in Come Blow Your Horn the Father refers to his son, Buddy, as "Tennessee Williams,"¹¹ when, in fact, he would be much more likely to be aware of, and refer in discourse to, Arthur Miller, since a reference to Miller would be more logical and expected both from the Father and from Simon. The domestic dramas of Miller are in fact the spiritual antecedents of the domestic comedies of Simon, in the use of theme, setting, and character-types.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 54, 56. ¹¹Ibid., p. 58.

Come Blow Your Horn, then, is a conventional New Comedy (if we accept Frye's theoretical formulation), with a variation (Alan is much older than the New Comedy hero), and a major, essential difference -- the triumph of the senex and his values (which include the hero's nascent, submerged values as well, the playwright suggests in the play, subliminally) over the hero, rather than the usual heroic triumph that, according to Frye, concludes most New Comedy.

The third playlet of Plaza Suite, "Visitor from Forest Hills," is a farcical realization of Frye's "comic Oedipus situation" theory, with its own unique comedic variation. In this playlet, the hero, Borden Eilser, is seen only at the very end, and has only one line: "Mimsey? . . . This is Borden . . . Cool it!"¹² However, with this one line he triumphs over the senex, and his "norm" of the calm, hip contemporary discourse succeeds effortlessly in getting Mimsey Hubley out of the bathroom, while the frantic, frenetic efforts of her father, Roy Hubley, senex exemplary, could not achieve that simple result. Here is a most interesting variation on a valid theory of comedy: the hero triumphs, almost totally in absentia, while the senex fails despite, or perhaps because of, the most exhausting and often undignified physically and emotionally demanding undertakings. If there is any underlying moral here it may well be the line from the standard, "nice and easy does it every time."

Another irony in the situation of "Visitor from Forest Hills," the final playlet of Plaza Suite, is that

¹²Neil Simon, Plaza Suite (New York: Samuel French, 1969), p. 91.

Borden had, in effect, already supplanted Roy by persuading Mimsey to accept him as the foremost man in her life, and that, in order to complete the ceremonial supplanting of senex by hero, it is the senex who struggles mightily for the ultimate result that the hero achieves effortlessly in no time at all. Without suggesting that Simon is aware of Frye's "comic Oedipus situation" theory, "Visitor from Forest Hills" is nevertheless an almost ideal inventive farcical rendering of that theory. This playlet is in keeping with that aspect of Frye's theory that maintains that the hero's value system triumphs over that of the senex at play's end, because Mimsey's locking of the bathroom door is an aspect of rigid behavior she acquired from her parents, a rigidity from which she is freed by Borden's words, words which compel her to open both the actual and the symbolic door that leads her from the rigidity of the previous generation to the apparent, anticipated, hoped-for malleability of the new one. Further, the young triumphs over the old, because although Mimsey locked the door because she was afraid that she and Borden would become the same intransigent type of couple that her parents are, Borden's pacifying words and her acquiescent response to them imply, or at least suggest, the possibility of a new, calmer, much more flexible marriage pattern for the future.

Of course, "Visitor from Forest Hills" also mirrors Frye's notion of New Comedy and its subsequent influence in that it concludes with the assertion of a wedding to take place immediately after the final curtain.

In Simon's God's Favorite, the motif of son replacing father is a secondary but nevertheless essential theme. The primary theme of the play, that of a man confronting fate

(God) and himself, will be discussed in a later chapter; but let us now discuss the "comic Oedipus situation" as it is manifested in this play. It is again manipulated so that, in effect, it is the "norm" of the senex that triumphs over that of the juvenile, but, in this play, unlike in Come Blow Your Horn, there is little suggestion that David had the "normal" values submerged within him all along; in fact, he is a staunch antagonist to his father's beliefs, values, and mode of living throughout most of the play, and becomes reconciled to them only at play's end. Also, in God's Favorite Joe Benjamin, David's father, is both senex and hero; David Benjamin is the secondary male lead -- the focus is on Joe until play's end: Joe Benjamin is, without question, the protagonist of God's Favorite; he is God's "favorite" throughout the play, and there is the suggestion at play's end that David may inherit that "honor."

The fusion, the marriage, the komos that concludes God's Favorite is more a spiritual than a physical one; it is the fusion of love between father and son, between man (both Joe and David) and God, and within man himself, as David comes to end his self-loathing, and, it is suggested, commences a process that will result in his achievement of inner harmony. At the end of God's Favorite David becomes God's favorite, suggesting once again, as in Come Blow Your Horn, the succession of father by son in the social order established in and by the play. The rhythmical continuation of the fundamental pattern of human life is once again renewed, and that continuation -- and that cyclical rhythm of continuity -- are the essence of comedy, according to Susanne Langer.¹³

¹³see Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp. 326-350.

As has been demonstrated, the struggle for personal power as contemporary comedy manifests itself via variations of Northrop Frye's "comic Oedipus situation" theory in three of Neil Simon's stage plays published to date. It is the theoretical -- and probably unconscious -- substructure -- with two major differences -- of his first stage play, is the cleverly disguised and manipulated essence of the farcical third, final playlet of Plaza Suite, and it is the secondary but nevertheless important theme of God's Favorite. The struggle for power in these plays, insofar as that struggle reflects Frye's theory, centers upon the societal displacement of an older man by a younger man. In each case the older man is willing to be superseded, because he assumes, correctly for the most part, that the younger man, in displacing him, will be continuing the traditional and accepted patterns and rhythms of living. The younger men are thrust into their roles as the displacers with varying degrees of enthusiasm and commitment in the three plays: Alan Baker becomes acquiescent as the play progresses, Borden Eisler is tacitly willing (although he expects to make changes when he takes over), and David Benjamin is steadfastly resistant until play's end, at which time his resistance undergoes a profound reversal. The mothers in each play are merely extensions of the senex to varying degrees. They provide no antagonism to the senex and only minimal support to the juvenile. The ingenues are just that (ingenues) in Come Blow Your Horn (although Connie Dayton, like Alan Baker, is older than the traditional New Comedy ingenue) and "Visitor from Forest Hills" in Plaza Suite, and there is no ingenue in God's Favorite. In the comedies (Come Blow

Your Horn and God's Favorite) it is the "norm" of the senex that predominates, while in the farce ("Visitor from Forest Hills" in Plaza Suite) the "norm" of the "hero" is triumphant, without that triumph having been exhibited for anything more than one speech of six words, but it having been ingeniously presented by the playwright in contrast to the onstage frenzy of the senex.

The senex has his own trials in each play: the Father in Come Blow Your Horn struggles with the English language, with his business problems, and with the rebellions for independence of his sons; Roy Hubley, in the third playlet of Plaza Suite, struggles with the farcical indignities he undergoes in order to fail to achieve his goal; and Joe Benjamin of course suffers the contemporary comedic equivalent, by the playwriting standards of Neil Simon, of the trials of Job.

CHAPTER IV:

THE SECOND-OLDEST BATTLE

Once the child breaks free from the parent, once the ties between man and his creator are severed (no matter who severs them), once Danny and Neil Simon establish their independence from Father and Mother, the next major struggle for power in a person's life is the one that takes place between a person and his (her) mate. This is a different struggle than the previous one, because, in this one, the struggle for authority and autonomy takes place within a framework in which the understanding and hope exist that the parties will live together permanently; therefore, the struggle for power within a "romantic," i.e., married, relationship is not one in which one party seeks to break free of the control of another, but one in which each party attempts to establish, assert, and dictate, if possible, his space, his rights, and his demands within the agreed-upon mutuality of the relationship. Given this nature of the struggle for power within a presumed lifetime partnership, it is essential for each party to establish, at the beginning of such a relationship, his (or her) own ground rules for the successful and harmonious functioning of that relationship. It is this attempt to establish oneself within a "love relationship" that is the theme of Neil Simon's second produced play, Barefoot in the Park. The subsequent manifestations of the struggle for power within marriage dominate the first playlet of Plaza Suite and the first three playlets of California Suite, and Simon returns to the struggle to establish oneself in marriage, albeit the second time around for both participants, in his latest published stage comedy, Chapter Two.

Interestingly, albeit paranthetically, both Come Blow Your Horn and Barefoot in the Park are plays about beginnings, reflecting Simon's incubation as a playwright; then, his third play, The Odd Couple, is a comedy about the difficulty of maintaining and continuing -- marriage, friendship, sanity, and life itself.

Like Come Blow Your Horn, Barefoot in the Park is a comedy about attempts to control major changes in one's life, changes imposed partially by life, partially by other people, and partially by oneself. Corie Bratter, the protagonist of Barefoot in the Park, is a young woman who is still developing, personally and socially; she is a young woman who enjoys her process of growth and sense of adventure, and who wants to share it, and her enjoyment of it, with her somewhat dour and too-efficiently businesslike young husband, Paul. She also attempts to imbue her mother with the spirit of spontaneous, adventuresome living represented by her (Corie's) stated desire to walk "barefoot in the park."¹ Corie's struggle, fundamentally, is to keep her youth and selfhood while, at the same time, establishing herself within the "adult" world of marriage and its presumably concomitant "maturity." She is abetted in her attempted liberations by Victor Velasco, an "older" man who represents the possibility of the survival of youthful joie-de-vivre beyond one's youth.

In her incisive study of the essence of comedy in Feeling and Form, Susanne Langer describes just this need of the human organism to sustain itself through both self-assertion and adaptation as the wellspring of comedy:

¹Neil Simon, Barefoot in the Park (New York: Samuel French, 1964), pp. 62-63.

The pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy, developed in countless different ways. . . . Life is teleological, the rest of nature is, apparently, mechanical; to maintain the pattern of vitality in a non-living universe is the most elementary instinctual purpose. An organism tends to keep its equilibrium amid the bombardment of aimless forces that beset it, to regain equilibrium when it has been disturbed, and to pursue a sequence of actions dictated by the need of keeping all its interdependent parts constantly renewed, their structure intact. Only organisms have needs; lifeless objects whirl or slide or tumble about, are shattered and scattered, stuck together, piled up, without showing any impulse to return to some pre-eminent condition and function. But living things strive to persist in a particular chemical balance, to maintain a particular temperature, to repeat particular functions, and to develop along particular lines, achieving a growth that seems to be performed in their earliest, rudimentary, protoplasmic structure.

That is the basic biological pattern which all living things share; the round of conditioned and conditioning organic processes that produces the life rhythm. When this rhythm is disturbed, all activities in the total complex are modified by the break; the organism as a whole is out of balance. But within a wide range of conditions, it struggles to retrieve its original dynamic form by overcoming and removing the obstacle, or if this proves impossible, it develops a slight variation of its typical form and activity and carries on life with a new balance of functions -- in other words, it adapts itself to the situation. . . .

But the impulse to survive is not spent only in defense and accomodation; it appears also in the varying power of organisms to seize on opportunities.²

²Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 327.

In Barefoot in the Park, while Corie is attempting to sustain herself and her relationship with Paul in the personal, immediate, basic, animal sphere, Paul is attempting to sustain himself in the social, potential, sophisticated, human sphere of the business world which he has just entered. Their struggle with each other regarding the steering of the relationship on its optimal course is one that involves divergence of means, not of ends; they share the objective of making the best life they can for themselves as a couple. Barefoot in the Park is indubitably light comedy because it is never in doubt that their ends are the same and that they will reach that end after two hours of stage time spent sparring about the means. A comedy gains weight, depth and dimension when the struggle for power between spouses vacillates between divergent means and ends, or when the ends which the mates seek are different, one from the other (see, for example, the first playlet of Plaza Suite, the discussion of which follows immediately after this consideration of Barefoot in the Park).

In Barefoot in the Park, Corie and Victor represent liberation, individuality, animal vitality -- in other words, they represent the comic rhythm of ongoing life, to paraphrase Langer's conception. They (Corie and Victor) struggle against the limitation, encrustation, conformity, habit, and rigidity that have, for a time, taken possession of Paul and Corie's mother. As almost all theorists of comedy from Aristotle and Horace to the present day have maintained, so at the end of Barefoot in the Park, the assertiveness and animation of life triumph and reform those who were temporarily afflicted with the absence of those virtues. There are two representations of the idea of "komos" at the end of

Barefoot in the Park: The young married couple will dutifully, and cheerfully, undergo the incessant rhythm of mating, and the older couple will go on a "date."³

There is a parallel, albeit in an even lighter vein, in Barefoot in the Park of the striving for familial independence of Alan and Buddy Baker in Come Blow Your Horn. In Barefoot in the Park, Corie wants to establish herself as an entity living independently of any reliance on her mother, as evidenced by the following exchange between Corie and the Telephone Man at the beginning of the play:

CORIE: Say, I'm awfully sorry
about the stairs.

MAN: You're really gonna live
up here, heh? . . . I
mean, every day?

CORIE: Every day.

MAN: You don't mind it?

CORIE: Mind it . . . ? I
love this apartment .
. . Well, it does
discourage people.

MAN: What people?

CORIE: Mothers, friends,
relatives, mothers.⁴

Another parallel between Simon's first two comedies is the representative textual designation of the parents in each play: in Come Blow Your Horn are Father and Mother, while in Barefoot in the Park Corie's mother is designated as "Mother" throughout -- she is the dramatic embodiment of her designation.

³Simon, Barefoot in the Park, p. 38.

⁴Ibid., p. 8.

Still other similarities between Barefoot in the Park and Come Blow Your Horn are the similar modes of eliciting guilt used by both the Mother in the former and the Father in the latter,⁵ and the third-person reference to someone who is immediately present.⁶ These techniques and modes of speech are both aspects of the use of the English language by upper-middle-class Jewish New Yorkers, some of the people about, and for whom, Simon writes.

The much-discussed (in the play) gag motif of having to climb the stairs to get to the apartment Corie has chosen (including the bit about whether the "stoop" is part of the "stairs"),⁷ is of course representative of the theatrical tradition of repetition of a comedic conceit, of "milking the gag," as it were. The stairs, and the demands they make upon their climbers, and their vertical distance from the street, are metaphors for Corie's attempt to transcend the mundane (and, if the reader will forgive a pun, the pedestrian), and of the effort it takes to achieve that transcendence.

Another device of comedic dramaturgy is used in Barefoot in the Park to establish Corie's spontaneity and joie-de-vivre as the "norm" of the world she wants to create for herself and Paul. That technique is inversion, and it is used in an exchange between Corie and Paul in which she accuses him of being "extremely proper and dignified" even when drunk; he takes this as an insult:

⁵Ibid., pp. 26-27. ⁶Ibid., p. 71.

⁷Ibid., pp. 6-7, p. 12, pp. 21-22.

CORIE: I'm beginning to wonder if you're capable of having a good time.

PAUL: Why? Because I like to wear my gloves in the winter?

CORIE: No. Because there isn't the least bit of adventure in you. Do you know what you are? You're a watcher. There are Watchers in this world and there are Do-ers. And the Watchers sit around watching the Do-ers do. Well, tonight you watched and I did.

PAUL: Yeah . . . Well, it was harder to watch what you did than it was for you to do what I was watching.

CORIE: You won't let your hair down for a minute. You couldn't even relax for one night. Boy, Paul, sometimes you act like a . . . a . . .

PAUL: What . . .? A stuffed shirt?

CORIE: I didn't say that.

PAUL: That's what you're implying.

CORIE: That's what you're anticipating. I didn't say you're a stuffed shirt. But you are extremely proper and dignified.

PAUL: I'm proper and dignified? When . . .? When was I proper and dignified?

CORIE: All right. The other night. At Delfino's . . . You were drunk, right?

PAUL: Right. I was stoned.

CORIE: There you are. I didn't know it until you told me in the morning. You're a funny kind of drunk. You just sat there looking unhappy and watching your coat.

PAUL: I was watching my coat because I saw someone else watching my coat. . . . Look, if you want, I'll get drunk for you sometime. I'll show you a slob, make your hair stand on end.

CORIE: It isn't necessary.

PAUL: Do you know . . . Do you know, in P. J. Clarke's last New Year's Eve, I punched an old woman? . . . Don't tell me about drunks.

CORIE: All right, Paul.

PAUL: When else? When else was I proper and dignified?

CORIE: Always. You're always dressed right, you always look right, you always say the right things. You're very close to being perfect.

PAUL: That's . . . that's a rotten thing to say.

CORIE: I have never seen you without a jacket. I always felt like such a slob compared to you. Before we were married I was sure you slept with a tie.

PAUL: No, no. Just for very formal sleeps.

CORIE: You can't even walk into a candy store and ask the lady for a Tootsie Roll. You've got to walk up to the counter and point at it and say, "I'll have that thing in the brown and white wrapper."

PAUL: That's ridiculous.

CORIE: And you're not. That's just the trouble. Like Thursday night. You wouldn't walk barefoot with me in Washington Square Park. Why not?

PAUL: Very simple answer. It was seventeen degrees.

CORIE: Exactly. That's very sensible and logical. Except it isn't any fun.⁸

This above exchange details the struggle for power between a young married couple within the comedic world of Neil Simon exemplarily: By the inversion of the usually-accepted social values, Corie (through Simon's manipulation of course) establishes a different set of priorities for the future of her personal relationship with Paul. He, believing and adhering far more vehemently to the socially-dictated virtues of propriety and dignity, must nevertheless compromise his belief and adherence for the sake of his marriage.

At play's end, in fact, all four of the power-struggle participants -- Corie, Paul, Mother, and Victor Velasco -- serve the usual comedy-ending dictum of compromise. Corie matures (somewhat), Paul mellows, Mother loosens, and Victor accepts, to some degree, his age and its attendant limitations. Here is still another manifestation of komos -- not the union of marriage but the harmony of compromise.

⁸Ibid., pp. 61-63.

There is no such compromise in the first playlet of Plaza Suite, which, theoretically, might well be portraying Corie and Paul twenty-five years later, with their early struggles for power within the relationship having become a desperate attempt by the wife, in this case called Karen Nash, to salvage any semblance of the relationship. This playlet, "Visitor from Mamaroneck," is the heaviest of Simon's comedies, tending toward profound despair for the protagonist at play's end, and suggesting the negation of any possible representation of komos more than any other of his plays. While other of his plays suggest darkness and shadow -- e.g., Last of the Red Hot Lovers, The Gingerbread Lady, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and The Sunshine Boys -- it is only in this play that the protagonist, Karen Nash, has almost no latitude at play's end to achieve her objective, no potential even to participate in the intramarital power struggle in which she has been a willing participant for twenty-five years. Walter Kerr realizes the seriousness embodied in this play, and the universally affecting sentiments of Sam Nash within it:

I have elsewhere expressed my immense admiration for a single line in Plaza Suite, a line which may make the first play of the trilogy the most perfect representative piece of work Mr. Simon has ever done. A husband, married 25 years and wretched with his wife during a weekend at the Plaza, is reminded of all he's accomplished in life: got the jobs he wanted, got the wife he wanted, got the kids he wanted, got the home he wanted, got the works. What, then, is he so miserable about? "I want to do it all over again," he explains, grinding his teeth hard.

The line comes as a jolt in the theater; we've been laughing at the foolish quibbles and complaints of these middle-aged

misfits, a wife who'd still like the Plaza to be romantic and a husband desperately trying to wriggle his way out, and we've accepted them as reasonably plausible Scarsdale wreckage, tuned up just a little bit to make their jokes bounce off the keyboard harder. But we hadn't realized they were this close to our own nerve-centers, to the hard, perverse core of our own suppressed dreams, and we are startled to notice how easy it was to drop from a laugh into an irremediable loss. The man can't do it all over again; the situation is hopeless. And so, with regret, all we can do is return to laughing about it.⁹

The humor of this playlet derives from Karen's wisecracking expressions of her frustrated, painful last efforts to sustain a relationship that she knows has slipped away from her. It moves toward pathos as it progresses, and the playlet ends on a suspended note, with none of the temporarily reassuring and life-rhythm sustaining final gestures we have come to expect of a comedy. "Visitor from Mamaroneck" is a very serious comedy, placed, curiously, before the two very broad comic pieces that complete the program of one-acters that is Plaza Suite.

There is much that is similar between "Visitor from Mamaroneck," the first playlet of Plaza Suite, and "Visitor from New York," the first playlet of California Suite. In both, the conflict concerns the final remnant of once-thriving relationships: in the former it is the vestige of a declining marriage, while in the latter it is the seventeen-year-old daughter of a couple that has been divorced for nine years; in both, the wisecracking female protagonist fails to achieve her objective -- Karen Nash, to save, to

⁹Walter Kerr, "What Simon Says," New York Times Magazine, Mar. 22, 1970, p. 14.

rekindle the marriage, Hannah Warren, to have her daughter return to the east coast to live with her: in both, the women mock the youthful appearance and mode-of-living of the men (Karen's husband, Sam, and Hannah's ex-husband, Billy) with wisecracks that bespeak their own concerns with lost youth and physical degeneration.¹⁰ (In fact, Hannah says in response to Billy's statement that, "You're not the Hannah I left nine years ago: And I'm missing the ovaries to prove it,"¹¹ indicating her own painful awareness of her aging.)

In both playlets, dark, menacing shadows of sadness lie immediately beneath and behind the often studied flippancy of their protagonists. These organisms -- Karen and Hannah -- are struggling to sustain themselves and adapt to the shocks of aging and singularly unpleasant surprises: Karen's surprises are her husband's affair with his secretary and his disinclination to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with her, thereby symbolically and actually severing both the mundane and the sentimental ties of marriage; Hannah's surprises are the departure of her daughter from New York, and from her (Hannah's) presence and influence, and her daughter's choice to live with Hannah's ex-husband and her father, Billy, and her daughter's decision to remain with her father despite (or perhaps in part because of) Hannah's efforts.

¹⁰Neil Simon, Plaza Suite (New York: Samuel French, 1969), pp. 19-21;
Neil Simon, California Suite (New York: Samuel French, 1977), pp. 5, 6, 7.

¹¹Simon, California Suite, p. 30.

Karen Nash and Hannah Warren are not happy; the difference between them is that Hannah is far more independent than Karen, and is able to sustain herself, both economically and emotionally -- seemingly at the expense of her humanity -- far more effectively than Karen. Karen is a woman of the past in her adherence to marriage and all it is supposed to represent, while Hannah is the "New Woman," liberated economically and intellectually, and more than able to hold her own in conversation, sarcasm, and the jaundiced world-view usually associated with hardened male editors (she is an editor professionally).¹²

In this context, the comedy theory of George Meredith is enlightening. He feels that women must be at least the relative equals of men in comedy, and he evinces strong support for the Hannah Warrens of comedy:

Now Comedy is the fountain of sound sense; not the less perfectly sound on account of the sparkle; and comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it. . . .

The heroines of Comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clearsighted; they seem so to be sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, look on one object, namely Life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The Comic

¹²Ibid., p. 16.

poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker. . . .¹³

"Visitor from New York" is an inventive playlet in that Simon uses the dichotomy between the conversion of Billy from neurotic New Yorker to healthy Californian and the steadfastness of Hannah to the neuroses, sarcasm, and jadedness of the east (New York and Washington, D.C.) to symbolize the contest for power between and among various forces within a person, within a relationship, and within a society. Hannah represents conservatism, intransigence, pragmatism, and aging, whereas Billy is the embodiment of change, malleability, lightness, and renewed youth. This conflict is summed up in the following exchange between them:

BILLY: . . . I'll tell you something, Hannah: For one of the brightest women in America, you bore the hell out of me. Your mind clicks off bric-a-bracs so goddam fast, it never has a chance to let an honest emotion or thought ever get through.

HANNAH: And you're so filled with honest emotions, you fall in love every time someone sings a ballad. You're worse than a hopeless romantic, you're a hopeful one.¹⁴

¹³George Meredith, An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897), pp. 22-23.

¹⁴Simon, California Suite, p. 17.

This playlet of course belongs legitimately to this chapter centering on mate-versus-mate conflict, because it continues the spectrum of marital relationships begun by Barefoot in the Park: Barefoot in the Park is marital beginnings, the first playlet of Plaza Suite is a marriage near its end, while "Visitor from New York" in California Suite is a marriage long after its end, with the partners coming together to discuss the most important product of that marriage -- their daughter. Thus, whereas in the other plays it is the preservation of autonomy within marriage that is the focal point of conflict, the crux of the contention between Hannah and Billy Warren is the nurturing and sustaining of the foremost creation of a now-defunct marriage, with both parents striving to participate in and render their optimal, individually-asserted contribution to her growth.

The other plays to be discussed in this chapter cover still other constellations along the marriage continuum. The second and third playlets of California Suite, the farcical "Visitor from Philadelphia," and the bitterly comedic "Visitor from London," respectively, present marriages that will sustain themselves despite a major violation of the marriage agreement in the former, and despite flagrant incompatibility and constant petty -- witty -- bickering (and Diana's ultimate loss of the Oscar) in the latter. Then, lastly, in Chapter Two, we return to the beginnings of marriage, but with a difference -- both parties to the marriage in Chapter Two are undertaking second marriages, so they have, in effect, gone beyond and back.

As stated above, the second playlet of California Suite, "Visitor from Philadelphia," is a blatant farce, catering to Simon's chosen audience, and, if there is a

message behind the mirth, it is that marriage must be preserved at any cost. Marvin Michaels inadvertently, unknowingly, and almost unconsciously spends the night with a prostitute in the bed he will share with his wife when she arrives from Philadelphia, and his wife, Millie, after the expected jokes and expressions of indignation, resigns herself to what has happened and decides to forgive Marvin. At play's end, both Marvin and Millie are crying, each unbeknownst to the other. The play, and its final action -- Marvin and Millie crying separately, individually, apart from each other -- is a metaphor of a conventionally-held philosophy of life: human existence is a farce, we make commitments to each other that we violate, we scramble to correct our mistakes and never quite can, we are discovered in our violations and our errors, we are angry at each other, then forgiving, but the residue of the offense remains, and we end up crying alone, having no one, not even our presumed lifetime mates, with whom to share the solitary, isolated terror of being mortal. Even this outright farce ends darkly, not in komos, but in the suggestion that no totally joyous, or even total, union is possible in marriage. This farce, like the first playlet of Plaza Suite, and like the third playlet of California Suite, shows the disquieting, destructive development of the komos undergone by the respective couples years ago: violation, dissolution, resignation, and the subtle, subliminal terror of being alone.

The third playlet of California Suite, "Visitor from London," has distinct reverberations of the first playlet, "Visitor from New York." Its protagonist, Diana Nichols, is very much like Hannah Warren: both are formidable, intelligent, witty women working in demanding, respected professions;

both resent the aging process, limitations, and the various other infringements of mortality upon them; both evince jealousy of sorts, Hannah for Billy's present lover, and Diana for her husband, Sidney's, involvements with men. The major difference between them is that Hannah can -- and has -- survived alone, whereas it appears that Diana would have a very rough time of it indeed without even the limited and imperfect, although profound and heartfelt, affection she receives from Sidney. Whereas Hannah compromises her will by agreeing to let her daughter live with her ex-husband, Diana's very life with Sidney is a compromise. Like the playlet before it ("Visitor from Philadelphia"), this work asserts how much compromise must go into a relationship if it is to work, even compromise to accept and hope to weather those periods when it simply does not work. And it is still another example of just how important compromise is to comedy; whereas tragedy is the rejection of compromise, comedy is its very acceptance.

Both Hannah and Diana possess a pungent wit: Hannah says, in response to Billy's statement that their daughter is not happy in New York: "Nobody's happy in New York. But they're alive."¹⁵ Diana responds to Sidney's sympathetic comment about her loss of the Oscar, "Diana, I am sincerely sorry you lost tonight. But look at it this way. It's just a little, bald, naked statue," by saying: "Just like you'll be one day."¹⁶

Diana expresses the universal problem of love for all humanity, but especially between lovers, mates and spouses, and she speaks most especially for herself and for Karen Nash in the following exchange with Sidney:

¹⁵Ibid., p. 18. ¹⁶Ibid., p. 82.

DIANA: Why don't you love me any more, Sidney?

SIDNEY: I've never stopped loving you . . . in my way.

DIANA: Your way doesn't do me any good. I want you to love me in my way.¹⁷

This is the crux of the struggle for power in marriage, the crux of the struggle within marriage for autonomy, authority, control. It is fine that you love me, but "I want you to love me in my way," and I will do all I can to achieve that goal.

The foundation of the marriage between Diana and Sidney is stated by Sidney when he says: ". . . we like each other . . . And we are each a refuge for our disappointments out there."¹⁸ And, despite the fact that that is a very real foundation indeed, it is certainly an insufficient one, and we may well presume that while Marvin and Millie Michaels cry openly, although apart from each other, Diana and Sidney Nichols sleep together, yet are covertly forlorn.

Whereas the above couples experience individual segments of the emotional marriage roller-coaster, George Schneider and Jennie Malone (later, Jennie Schneider) experience a kaleidoscopic range of emotional ups and downs in the short time that they are married during the second part of the play, in Simon's latest published play as of this writing, Chapter Two. Chapter Two is a play that splits into two parts the struggles for power as discussed in this study. We shall of course deal with the intramarital struggle

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 85-86. ¹⁸Ibid., p. 88.

between George and Jennie in this chapter, but there is the equally -- or perhaps more -- important internal struggle that George and Jennie undergo individually; these struggles will be discussed in the appropriate chapter to follow.

Whereas Corie and Paul Bratter are attempting to construct a domestic situation, Karen Nash is attempting to reclaim one, and Diana and Sidney Nichols to maintain one, George Schneider and Jennie Malone are attempting to reconstruct one that was founded initially on the ephemeral foundation of "love-at-first-sight." After the first blushes of that love have faded, it is more important than ever for both of them, but especially for Jennie, to establish the form and guidelines of their subsequent relationship.

Essentially, the struggle in the George-Jennie marriage does take place within George himself as well. Jennie represents his future, attempting to pull him from his self-inflicted, painfully insistent past: the battleground is the present. Jennie makes the mistake of agreeing to live with George in the apartment he shared with his beloved wife; one of the symbols of the triumph of Jennie, of the future, and of Jennie and George's marriage is the agreement between them to find their own apartment and abandon disquieting memories as much as possible.

Chapter Two is the only one of Simon's stage comedies to date with a complete, contrasting, complementary subplot. The attempted, never-consummated affair between George's brother, Leo, and Jennie's best friend, Faye, counterpoints the romantic attempt at stability between George and Jennie. Whereas it appears at play's end that George and Jennie may well succeed in their liaison while Leo and Faye obviously have not, the problem is essentially the same for both

couples -- it is the universal problem of "mating," i.e., how to make any relationship work at all. The ultimate loneliness of Faye and Leo is, in its way, more distressing than the apparently resolved conflict between George and Jennie; for George and Jennie, there is conflict and resolution, while for Faye and Leo there is only the incessant (with people other than each other) near-coming together, never to touch, like two hyperbolas drawn upon the graph of human experience that never quite become tangent to each other.

The struggle for power in the near-incipient affair between Faye and Leo is what destroys the possibility of that affair; she wants romance, he wants lust; in fact, she doesn't quite know what she wants, and he may not want what he knows -- the endless, joyless round of affairs that he has pursued for years. Their internal conflicts prevent not only their potential affair but any potential for happiness within either one of them. Their individual internal conflicts will be discussed in the subsequent appropriate chapter; as mates to each other, even for a short while, they are strikingly unsuitable; it appears that they are unsuitable as well to the mates they have had, individually and separately from each other, for many years.

Thus we have the kaleidoscope of the struggle for power between mates, potential mates, and ex-mates in the stage comedies of Neil Simon. Maintaining and sustaining any relationship is difficult, Simon tacitly tells us (even relationships between and among friends, as we will see in the next chapter), but the relationship between mates is the most difficult one of all, for it is more profound (it is hoped), more intimate, more demanding, and, occasionally,

more rewarding than others. The struggle for power between mates, potential mates and ex-mates in the stage comedies of Neil Simon is most admirably summed up by Susanne Langer, unknowingly of course, in her study of aesthetic theory, Feeling and Form, as she talks about the second-oldest battle:

There it is in a nutshell: the contest of men and women -- the most universal contest, humanized, in fact civilized, yet still the primitive joyful challenge, the self-preservation and self-assertion whose progress is the comic rhythm.¹⁹

¹⁹Langer, p. 345.

CHAPTER V:

"YA GOTTA HAVE FRIENDS"

One must eventually leave home, mates may come and go, but a contemporary man in the society from which and for which Neil Simon writes must have friends. Simon's third produced play, The Odd Couple, details the struggle for power between, and among, contemporary friends; and, in the process of portraying the conflict between Oscar Madison and Felix Ungar, Simon presents us with two of the rare archetypal characters created by an artist in the twentieth century. The conflict between Felix and Oscar, and the counterpointing dichotomy in personality between Felix and Oscar themselves, represent two opposite archetypes of human personality and the uneasy relationship between them. Felix is neatness, pettiness, order, concern, and neurosis; Oscar is sloppiness, carelessness, disorder, recklessness, and childlike (and childish) freedom from responsibility. The comedy stemming from their cohabitation is inevitable. We shall discuss the struggle for power between and among friends in the stage comedies of Neil Simon, beginning with The Odd Couple, and then considering The Star-Spangled Girl, The Sunshine Boys, the fourth, final playlet of California Suite, and the second playlet of Plaza Suite.

"The only man in the world with clenched hair;"¹ in this single line Oscar Madison, and of course Neil Simon,

¹Neil Simon, The Odd Couple (New York: Samuel French, 1966), p. 32.

have succeeded in capturing the essence of the character of Felix Ungar. Not only is this line funny, but it is insightful, perceptive, and revelatory. There are many such lines about Felix Ungar in The Odd Couple, and several about Oscar Madison; it is by virtue of Neil Simon's succinctly comic lines of description of these two characters that they have become archetypal comic characters, elevating The Odd Couple into the realm of the classic comic play.

Simon's modus operandi in The Odd Couple is to establish the characters of Felix and Oscar immediately, and then to thrust these two opposing personalities into an explosive situation of mutual irreconcilability. The playwright spells out for the audience the obligatory situational humor that must result from the clash of two incompatible individuals, and of two incompatible human types, who are, nevertheless, friends, caught in a shared living arrangement. Walter Kerr sees this comic conflict as the thematic essence of The Odd Couple:

There is a root, as real as a toothache, beneath the grin of Simon's soundest work, and it is one of the things that anchors the mere playfulness, ties a kite string to the broadest gags. The Odd Couple, in its simplest statement, is already a home truth: two men who don't get along with their wives will probably not get along with each other in exactly the same way. It's funny the minute you hear it; a motion-picture company paid a million dollars (more or less, and no doubt more) for its outline alone, before a word had been committed to paper; it's a foolproof stage situation . . .

And it's also a sad, helpless little commentary on the cussedness of things conubial; indeed, on the exasperating nature of all relationships. These two men haven't

learned anything from their marital quarrels that will help them share an apartment now, and they aren't going to learn anything from their quarrels now that will help them next time around at home. In fact, they aren't going home. They aren't going anywhere, except into new failures. The fact that they're marvelously funny every moment they're failing doesn't disguise the accurate, and not at all soothing, observation on which their mishaps rest. Hilarity dances on sloppy iceboxes and nights alone in bed.²

In The Odd Couple Neil Simon uses two prevalent contemporary social situations that are pregnant with conflict -- divorce and the weekly poker game. They are the basic elements that create the inevitable dramatic environment that leads to the mismatching of "the odd couple" in their mutually intolerable living situation. Obviously, divorce is the result of an irreconcilable struggle for power within a marriage; whereas the couples discussed in the previous chapter seek to avoid it, Oscar has already undergone it, and Felix, at play's beginning, has separated from his wife and faces the imminence of divorce. And, at the height of the conflict between Oscar and Felix, Oscar "asks" Felix for a "divorce" as well:

OSCAR: It's all over, Felix. The whole marriage. We're getting an annulment! Don't you understand? I don't want to live with you any more. I want you to pack your things, tie it up with your Saran Wrap and get out of here.³

²Walter Kerr, "What Simon Says," New York Times Magazine, Mar. 22, 1970, p. 24.

³Simon, The Odd Couple, p. 80.

Of course, a poker game is a classic example of a power struggle within a small group of men, no matter how friendly and informal the game; a poker game is not only the situation which dictates that one must struggle to win and not to lose, but it is also a situation in which the participants vie for psychological and physical superiority over their opponents, not only to promote and increase their chances of winning, but for the sheer authority and self-aggrandizement of having the power itself.

Basically, the poker-playing friends of Felix and Oscar in The Odd Couple may be considered counterparts of the two major characters. Speed and Roy are, in effect, less extreme extensions of Oscar, while Vinnie and Murray are less pathologically neurotic -- apparently -- counterparts of Felix. Felix, Vinnie and Murray never make truly biting, sarcastic remarks, while Oscar, Speed and Roy make them whenever possible. Felix, Vinnie and Murray represent the softer, more bungling, less aggressive aspects of mankind, while Oscar, Speed and Roy are the brusque, direct, sometimes insensitive components of humanity. When the poker game breaks up in Scene One of Act Two, because of Felix' overattention to neatness, cleanliness, and the culinary arts, it is Speed who leaves first, and Roy who leaves second; Murray and Vinnie would never take it upon themselves to break up the game at all. And notice the beautifully Felixlike courtesy and attention to culinary detail in the exchange between Murray and Vinnie about a sandwich, and later a pickle, in the same scene:

VINNIE: (Chewing.) Gee, this is
delicious. Who wants a
bite?

MURRAY: Is the toast warm?

VINNIE: Perfect. And not too much mayonnaise. It's really a well-made sandwich.

MURRAY: Cut me off a little piece.

VINNIE: Give me your napkin. I don't want to drop any crumbs.

SPEED: (Watches them, horrified, as VINNIE carefully breaks sandwich over MURRAY'S napkin. Then turns to OSCAR.) Are you listening to this? Martha and Gertrude at the Automat. (Almost crying in despair.) What the hell happened to our poker game?

. . .

VINNIE: (To MURRAY.) Did you notice what he does with the bread?

MURRAY: What?

VINNIE: He cuts off the crusts. That's why the sandwich is so light.

MURRAY: And then he only uses the soft, green part of the lettuce. (Chewing.) It's really delicious.⁴

. . .

MURRAY: (To VINNIE.) Are you going to eat that pickle?

VINNIE: I wasn't thinking of it. Why? Do you want it?

⁴Ibid., pp. 43-44.

MURRAY: Unless you want it. It's your pickle.

VINNIE: No, no. Take it. I don't usually eat pickle.

And then follows, of course, Oscar's characteristic response to such an exchange:

(VINNIE holds plate with pickle out to MURRAY. OSCAR slaps the plate which sends the pickle flying through the air.)

OSCAR: Deal the cards!

MURRAY: What did you do that for?

OSCAR: Just deal the cards. You want to play poker, deal the cards. You want to eat, go to Schrafft's. (To VINNIE.) Keep your sandwich and your pickles to yourself. . . . I'm losing ninety-two dollars and everybody's getting fat!⁵

One of the most important aspects of the attempt to preserve and maintain friendships is the attempt to preserve and maintain the rituals and traditions of those friendships and of the circumstances and environments in which they are practiced and celebrated; therefore, Felix's domestic machinations, when they disturb the long-established ritual of the weekly poker game, threaten the uneasy and hard-won balance of power that obtained before he left Frances to move in with Oscar. The other poker players' sense of

⁵Ibid., pp. 44-45.

ritual, of tradition, and of camaraderie are threatened and undermined by Felix's obsessive-compulsive attachment to his new home, as evidenced by the stage directions to, and the beginning of Act Two.⁶

In the "domestic" struggle between Oscar and Felix, Oscar appears to be holding all the cards. They are living in his home, he took Felix in, and he is obviously the physical superior of the two (although it would be interesting to see, or to stage, a production in which this was not the case). Felix attempts to counterbalance Oscar's power advantage by using the by-now familiar Simon guilt-eliciting tactic:

FELIX: Okay. . . . As long as I heard you say the words, "Get out of the house." . . . Fine. . . . But remember, what happens to me is your responsibility. Let it be on your head.⁷

Then, during the violent confrontation that begins Act Three, Oscar, much to Felix's disgust, fails to distinguish between two eminently dissimilar -- in Felix's book (a cookbook, no doubt) -- types of noodles, and Oscar again responds characteristically:

OSCAR: (With a pointing finger.) I'm warning you. You want to live here, I don't want to see you, I don't want to hear you and I don't want to smell your cooking. Now get this spaghetti off my poker table.

FELIX: Ha! Haha!

⁶Ibid., pp. 41-44. ⁷Ibid., p. 81.

OSCAR: What the hell's so funny?

FELIX: It's not spaghetti. It's linguini.

(OSCAR picks up the plate of linguini, crosses to the doorway, and hurls it into the kitchen.)

OSCAR: Now it's garbage!⁸

It is imperative to understand that there is no sub-structure of homosexuality, or even homosexual implication, in the Felix-Oscar relationship. The struggle for power between them is a conflict between two heterosexual men, and, unlike the contentions between Karen and Sam Mash in the first playlet of Plaza Suite and Diana and Sidney Nichols in the third playlet of California Suite, the struggle for power between Felix and Oscar has no basis in sexual-romantic contretemps. Simon tries to make clear Felix's unalloyed heterosexuality (we are to assume Oscar's tacitly) by giving him the following exchange with Oscar:

OSCAR: . . . unless I get to touch something soft in the next two weeks, I'm in big trouble.

FELIX: You mean women?

OSCAR: If you want to give it a name, all right, women.

FELIX: That's funny. You know I haven't even thought about women in weeks.

OSCAR: I fail to see the humor.

⁸Ibid., pp. 75-76.

FELIX: No, that's really strange. I mean when Frances and I were happy I don't think there was a girl on the street I didn't stare at for ten minutes. I used to take the wrong subway home just following a pair of legs. . . . But since we broke up, I don't even know what a woman looks like.⁹

The struggle for power between Felix and Oscar is the stronger, and the more comedic, for its lack of sexual innuendo; and Felix is funnier as a man whose sexuality and sexual inclinations are never doubted, but who is, nevertheless, prissy, fussy, sensitive, and domestically oriented.

An inevitable, interesting, and subtle conflict that obtains between Felix and Oscar in The Odd Couple is the struggle concerning the very idea of domesticity. One of the many fundamental differences between Felix and Oscar is that Felix needs either the actuality (with his wife, Frances), or, now, the illusion, with Oscar, of having a home, a domicile, while Oscar eschews the conventional representations of that selfsame concept. Felix attempts to institute his idea of "domestic bliss" into his living arrangement with Oscar, while Oscar will have none of it; to Oscar, his own home is not so much a home but a cave or a cage that some wild animal might have. He assesses his own negligence of his home incisively and wryly in the following exchange:

ROY: Hey, Oscar, let's make a rule. Every six months you have to buy fresh potato chips. How can you live like this? Don't you have a maid?

⁹Ibid., p. 52.

OSCAR: (Shakes his head) She quit
after my wife and kids left.
The work got to be too much
for her.¹⁰

Their cardplaying buddies, thematic extensions of Felix and Oscar, as mentioned before, also reflect their counterparts' respective feelings about domesticity. Although Roy and Speed (counterparts of Oscar) criticize Oscar for the way he keeps his home, both are happy with the comfortable poker-playing atmosphere in that home (B.F. -- Before Felix); and, neither Roy nor Speed, nor any of the poker players, talks about the home lives of Roy and Speed; we do not know where or how they live, we do not know the names of their wives or children, and, in fact, we do not know whether they have wives or children. By direct contrast, we are made aware of the home lives of Vinnie and Murray, who are extensions of the thoroughly domestic Felix in The Odd Couple. Vinnie often mentions cutings he is planning with his wife, Phoebe,¹¹ while Murray has the following exchange with his wife, Mimi, on the telephone:

OSCAR: (Into phone.) . . . Ch, hello,
sweetheart. (He becmeoes very
seductive and pulls phone to
side and talks low, but still
audibly to OTHERS, who turn
and listen.) I told you not
to call me during the game.
. . . I can't talk to you now.
. . . You know I do, darling.
. . . All right, just a minute.
(He turns.) Murray, it's your
wife.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 10.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 7, 12, 29, 46.

MURRAY: (Nods disgustedly as he crosses to phone.) I wish you were having an affair with her. . . . Then she wouldn't bother me all the time. (Picks up phone.) Hello, Mimi, what's wrong?

OSCAR: (Woman's voice, imitating Mimi.) What time are you coming home? (Then imitating MURRAY.) I don't know, about twelve, twelve-thirty.

MURRAY: (Into phone.) I don't know, about twelve, twelve-thirty! Why, what did you want, Mimi? . . . "A corned-beef sandwich and a strawberry malted!"

OSCAR: Is she pregnant again?

MURRAY: (Holds phone over chest.) No, just fat. (Into phone again.) What? . . . How could you hear that, I had the phone over my chest?¹²

Although Vinnie's domestic life seems docilely pleasant and Murray's seems pleasantly abrasive, both do indeed have the essence of that which Felix has lost not long ago, that which he cherishes above all else, and that which the initially indifferent and subsequently antipathetic Oscar, Roy and Speed dismiss and come to decry -- a genuine domestic life.

There is an ironic resolution to The Odd Couple. Sloppy, irresponsible Oscar has had his home and his life streamlined and rendered functional by fussy Felix; he (Oscar)

¹²Ibid., pp. 14-15; (see also, p. 46.)

no longer owes back-alimony to his ex-wife, Blanche, and even he is cognizant of the improved conditions in his apartment,¹³ as the final speech of the play indicates:

OSCAR: Then let's play poker.
(Sharply to the BOYS.)
And watch your cigarettes,
will you? This is my
house, not a pigsty.

(Takes the ashtray from
the side table next to
the armchair, bends down
and begins to pick up
the butts. The BCYS
settle down to play poker.)

CURTAIN¹⁴

Despite his indifference and his hostility, Oscar's life has been influenced and ameliorated by the three-week domestic arrangement between Felix and him. Notice, for example, the use of the expression, "this is my house," by Oscar in the above-quoted curtain line. Notice also the fact that Oscar has learned the niceties of distinction in the semantics of noodles and utensils (see pp. 107-108):

MURRAY: (Comes out of the kitchen.)
Hey, did you know there's
spaghetti all over the
kitchen?

OSCAR: Yes, I know and it's not
spaghetti, it's linguini.¹⁵

Most ironically, of course, at play's end, it is clear that Felix will be staying ("just for a few days") with the adoring (of him) Pigeon sisters whom Oscar so coveted earlier in the play.

¹³Ibid., p. 89. ¹⁴Ibid., p. 90. ¹⁵Ibid., p. 83.

For his part, Felix states at play's end that he has changed:

MURRAY: It's your wife.

FELIX: (Turning to MURRAY.) Oh? Well, do me a favor, Murray. Tell her I can't speak to her now. But tell her I'll be calling her in a few days because she and I have a lot to talk about. And tell her if I sound different to her, it's because I'm not the same man she kicked out three weeks ago.¹⁶

Thus, The Odd Couple ends in compromise, in a comingling of once intransigently irreconcilable attitudes, in a marriage of influences, in a spiritual komos of friendship. The extremes are muted, for the moment, and counterbalanced by each other. Once again, comic heroes do not transcend life, but, we are happy to see, they transcend themselves, and those very shortcomings of theirs at which we were laughing only moments ago; they transcend themselves and their failings and imperfections, if only for that brief moment frozen forever in time, that brief moment before the final curtain.

No such compromise, comingling or komos occurs at the end of The Sunshine Boys. At play's end, Al Lewis and Willie Clark are as intransigent toward each other as at play's beginning. These two now-ancient "Sunshine Boys" are not older versions of Felix and Oscar. They are not really two irreconcilably different types of men, but, rather, two individuals who dislike each other as individuals, sharing

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 38-39.

a dislike based on the other person's habits, idiosyncracies and preferences. Although they are different enough from each other to dislike (and make an issue of) the differences they perceive, they are alike in their intensities and expressions of dislike for each other. Whereas Felix never resents Oscar for having taken him in and Oscar never truly resents Felix for having made it necessary to take him in (he just resents what Felix has done since having been taken in!), one feels that Lewis and Clark resent fate and each other for having made it necessary for them to work together for 43 years.¹⁷ Of course, having worked together for 43 years, their relationship was more like a marriage than a friendship or even a business relationship, and it was their unity and entity as a comedy team that marked the only true point of harmony and respect between them:

WILLIE: There'll never be another
 one like him . . . Nobody
 could time a joke the way
 he could time a joke . . .
 Nobody could say a line
 the way he could say it .
 . . I knew what he was
 thinking, he knew what I
 was thinking . . . One
 person, that's what we
 were . . . Al Lewis was
 the best. The best!¹⁸

It may in fact be postulated that the underlying cause for Willie's resentment of Al is that he destroyed their long-time, hard-earned, on-stage domesticity by quitting the act.

¹⁷Neil Simon, The Sunshine Boys (New York: Samuel French, 1972), p. 19.

¹⁸Ibid.

The struggle for power between the ex-Sunshine Boys in The Sunshine Boys is a unique one in Simon's dramaturgy in that the struggle is one which has been dormant for the eleven years that they have not worked together, but that is once again brought to the fore with their personal reunion for a television variety show. All of the old contentions, magnified by eleven years of pondering, festering, and mushrooming, explode into the torrent of incompatibility that results in Willie's heart attack. No one triumphs in this conflict, and the entity that should have prevailed -- Lewis & Clark, The Sunshine Boys, together -- is presented to the national television audience as a shadow of the past (a tape of their appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show eleven years ago is shown instead of "The Doctor Will See You Now" sketch done live) rather than as the substance of the present.

The Sunshine Boys is not about old age but about irascibility; however, the chronological ages of Al Lewis and Willie Clark are of course important and fundamental attributes of their personalities -- of their "entities" -- and those chronological ages are essential to the way those entities contribute to the texture of Simon's comedy. Since chronological age is one of those earthbound limitations that constrains a mortal (at whatever age he may be), it is inevitable that age is usually a relevant and important aspect of a character in a comedy; for instance, we can hardly picture Jack Falstaff as a juvenile or as a doddering ancient -- he is the age he is in the plays in which he is presented; by the same token, the senex is an established citizen of middle age; the very mention of the names of character types in comedy conjures immediately their approximate ages -- innamorati, pantalone, scoubrette.

The age of the person playing these characters does not matter (Tiberio Fiorilli was still playing Scaramouche -- and quite acrobatically at that -- at the age of 83); it is the essentially-fixed, yet timeless age of the character that is relevant. In this context, Albert Cook is enlightening about the relative differences of the characters' ages in tragedy and comedy:

In tragedy the age of the protagonist is an incidental part of the symbol. The aged Lear, the young Hamlet, the middle-aged Othello, are all struggling souls before time, though the poet may stress the time of life more in some cases than others -- for example, middle age in Antony and Cleopatra. . . .

In comedy social man's position is determined by his relation to generation and to family; it is important whether he is bachelor or paterfamilias, son, husband, or father.¹⁹

The thoroughgoing irascibility of the old "boys" in The Sunshine Boys is the single most important root of the comedy that is The Sunshine Boys; the theory of comedy that most appropriately describes and explains this play is neither modern nor ancient, but rather one halfway between the two, and, in fact, a clearing house for both, drawing from the history of theories of comedy that came before it, and contributing consequentially to the theories of comedy that were to be propounded after it: that theory is Ben Jonson's theory of "humours;" it is stated in Jonson's play, Every Man Out of His Humour, written in 1599; the speaker is Asper:

¹⁹Albert Cook, The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 48.

Why, humour, as 'tis 'ens,' we thus define it
 To be a quality of air or water,
 And in itself holds these two properties,
 Moisture and fluxure; as, for demonstration,
 Pour water on this floor, 'twill wet and run.
 Likewise the air, forced through a horn or trumpet,
 Flows instantly away, and leaves behind
 A kind of dew; and hence we do conclude
 That whatsoe'er hath fluxure and humidity,
 As wanting power to contain itself,
 Is humour. So in every human body,
 The choler, melancholy, phlegm, and blood,
 By reason that they flow continually
 In some one part, and are not continent,
 Receive the name of humours. Now thus far
 It may, by metaphor, apply itself
 Unto the general disposition:
 As when some one peculiar quality
 Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
 All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
 In their confluxions, all to run one way,
 This may be truly said to be a humour.²⁰

Willie and Al of course suffer from an excess of the "humour" known as choler. They are choleric. They are bilious. They are contentious. They are . . . irascible.

Of course, Willie Lewis' and Al Clark's conflicts are as much intra-personal as interpersonal. They must contend with something they have never experienced before -- old age, and with its attendant limitations, and with its unpleasant, insinuating, insistent harbingers of feebleness, senility, and death. Willie focuses upon Al much of his resentment against the natural process of aging that has denied him his foremost achievement -- being one of "The Sunshine Boys." Lewis and Clark struggle, basically, unknowingly, for a power they will never again have -- the power of knowing that you are not old; the unconscious power of youth; of having it and not knowing that you have it.

²⁰Paul Lauter, Theories of Comedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 116-117.

Three people who have youth -- who, in fact, have too much youth in many respects -- are the three principals of Simon's least successful play (for himself, the critics, and at the box-office), The Star-Spangled Girl. Simon himself has criticized the play.²¹

His sense of the play being "manufactured,"²² and not flowing is a perceptive evaluation of the final product that is The Star-Spangled Girl, and it suggests the lack of fundamental soundness that underlines, and undermines, the foundation of the play. It follows several theories of comedy in part, adheres to none of them totally, and is not a theoretically sound and unified work of art. It is, in a sense, and perhaps most fundamentally, a domestic comedy in that Sophie disrupts and ultimately changes the domestic structure of the lives of Andy and Norman, while Andy wants to maintain its status quo. It also has elements of the "comic Oedipus situation," in that Norman and Andy represent politically radical youth rebelling against Mr. Franklyn, their publisher/father figure (an offstage character who speaks to them only by phone), and, by extension, against society itself. The Star-Spangled Girl purports to be a comedy of character as well, in that Simon attempts to make Sophie, Andy, and especially Norman "characters," in the colloquial sense of the word. Then, too, Sophie's credo echoes the comedy theory of Susanne Langer in its espousal of the idea of the human organism functioning in order to sustain itself, making her a Langeresque comedy heroine; says Sophie: "Mah principle is breathing, eating and living,

²¹See pp. 60, 119. ²²See p. 60.

just like any other animal on this earth."²³ Sophie Rauschmeyer is indeed intent upon sustaining the rhythm of life.

The Star-Spangled Girl ends with a komos of sorts, as "true love" finds Andy and Sophie.

Thus, while touching several bases, The Star-Spangled Girl settles on none, and has an unsteady, inconstant, inconsistent, shifting foundation; as Simon himself says,

I wish I could bury The Star-Spangled Girl somewhere. When that play appeared it was, whoops, what happened to him? Walter Kerr gave the best explanation: He said, "Neil Simon . . . hasn't had an idea for a play this season, but, he's gone ahead and written one anyway!"²⁴

The Star-Spangled Girl is not a representative Neil Simon play, not only because of its relative lack of success, but for other reasons as well; it is not part of the mainstream of Simon's work, not one of the kind of plays that Simon usually writes. As the quotation from Walter Kerr indicates, the artifice of The Star-Spangled Girl is palpable, and far overshadows whatever art there may be in the play. In The Star-Spangled Girl Simon is not writing about people and situations that are intimate and personal to him, or, in fact, about people and situations that are in any way part of his experience. He has set the play not in New York but in an area that is relatively unfamiliar to him, to his usual characters, and to his chosen audience -- he has set the play in "a duplex studio apartment overlooking the bay in San Francisco."²⁵

²³Neil Simon, The Star-Spangled Girl (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1968), p. 41.

²⁴Playboy, Vol. 26, No. 2, Feb. 1979, p. 76.

²⁵Simon, The Star-Spangled Girl, p. 5.

There are no characters in The Star-Spangled Girl with crises of mid-life or beyond, as so often happens in his plays. And, most uncharacteristically, although The Star-Spangled Girl might well be construed as a domestic comedy, there is no genuine element of family life in it. It is the only play under consideration in this study that does not even contain references to the relatives of the characters in it.

Simon's plays, generally, emphasize family relationships, whether those plays are domestic comedies or not. The idea, and the actuality, of "the family" is fundamental to Simon's dramaturgy. One need only recall the family-centered conflicts of Come Blow Your Horn, Barefoot in the Park, the first and third playlets of Plaza Suite, The Gingerbread Lady, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, God's Favorite, and the first three playlets of California Suite, to realize the importance of the concept of the family to the dramaturgy of Neil Simon. And even in those comedies to which it is not central, the notion of family (and family ties) is relevant: In The Odd Couple, it is the separation from their families that throws Felix and Oscar together; and Felix's need for, and Oscar's disavowal of, domestic life consequentially shape their experience in living together. In the second playlet of Plaza Suite, "Visitor from Hollywood," (to be discussed later in this chapter) it is Muriel Tate's identity as a housewife and mother that most readily defines her for the audience, for Jesse Kiplinger, and, to some degree, for herself as well. In Last of the Red Hot Lovers (to be discussed in the next chapter), Barney tries to have an assignation with three different women (one woman per act) in his mother's apartment (while she is away, of course)! And

Simon, at the end of the play, depicts Barney as a failed Lothario calling his wife from his mother's apartment and inviting her to meet him there. In The Sunshine Boys, Ben Silverman, the agent who attempts to reunite Willie Clark and Al Lewis, is Willie's nephew; and Al talks at length about his daughter and her family, with whom he is living. So, perhaps one reason for the uncharacteristic lack of success of The Star-Spangled Girl is its most surprisingly uncharacteristic lack of reference to a family, its members, and its conflicts among the stage plays of Neil Simon.

Norman Cornell and Andy Hobart in The Star-Spangled Girl are friends whose relationship changes while their environment does not -- they remain in their apartment. By contrast, the friendship of Mort and Beth Hollender and Stu and Gert Franklyn is all but destroyed while they're on vacation, in the fourth, final playlet of California Suite. The theme of this blatant farce is akin to the theme of The Odd Couple; the theme of this playlet, "Visitors from Chicago," is that even close friends cannot abide too much of each other for too long. But, unlike Felix and Oscar in The Odd Couple, the odd couples in "Visitors from Chicago" learn nothing from each other and from their shared experience. That is why this playlet is a farce rather than a comedy -- there is no komos, no compromise, no conciliation in "Visitors from Chicago," but merely the farcical agglomeration of physical conflict.

The struggle for power between the two couples, and especially between the two men in "Visitors from Chicago" is almost wholly physical, and results in considerable pain for all four of the participants. This playlet imitates the silent screen comedy-Laurel & Hardy-Three Stooges formula of

the snowballing accumulation of unintended offense, catastrophe, and physical revenge. These pyramidding acts of physical violence, bereft of logic and dismissing the underlying friendship of the participants, create a torrent of laughter without thought; they achieve the intended effect of farce. "Visitors from Chicago" fulfills Allardyce Nicoll's description of farce:

Farce . . . came to mean simply a short humorous play. As, however, in a short play there is usually no time or opportunity for the broader display of character and of plot, farces came rapidly to deal only with exaggerated, and hence often impossible, comic incidents with frequent resort to mere horseplay. With this signification the word has endured to modern times.²⁶

"Visitors from Chicago" is indeed "mere horseplay." Although this playlet involves two married couples, it stands alone with The Star-Spangled Girl in Simon's dramaturgy in presenting no intrafamilial conflict. And, although it involves characters whose ages approximate those of the majority of Simon's characters and of his chosen audience, it also shares with The Star-Spangled Girl the negative distinction of being the only two plays of Simon's considered in this study that broach no serious subjects, that deal with no issues of genuine, meaningful personal interest to Simon, to his chosen audience, or even, really, to the characters in the plays themselves.

An anomaly, even to this collection of heterogeneous plays, but belonging with them nevertheless, is the second playlet of Plaza Suite, "Visitor from Hollywood." It is

²⁶Allardyce Nicoll, The Theory of Drama (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1954), pp. 87-88.

Simon's most politic struggle for personal power ("politic: prudently or artfully contrived; expedient, as a plan, action, remark, etc."²⁷), in that it makes greater use of subtextual maneuvering than any of the others, thus representing the characters in it as political as well as social entities in the course of the play. In one sense, it is akin to The Sunshine Boys, in that in it old friends are again reunited; but it is unlike The Sunshine Boys in that "Visitor from Hollywood" concludes, if not with a kind of komos, then at least with the suggestion of physical intimacy between Muriel Tate and Jesse Kiplinger.

On the surface, this playlet reflects, in a social sense, Susanne Langer's assessment of comedy as "the strain of maintaining a vital balance amid the alien and impartial chances of the world, complicated and heightened by passionate desires;"²⁸ it appears that it is this balance that Muriel Tate is attempting to maintain against the seductive efforts of Jesse Kiplinger. But, ever-so-subtly, what Ms. Langer calls "the sense of precariousness that is the typical tension of light comedy,"²⁹ shifts in the perception of the audience; the viewer (reader) begins to wonder whether Muriel Tate did not intend all along to be seduced by Jesse Kiplinger; and, further, to wonder whether her apparent resistance to his overtures is perhaps no more than her own way of heightening the excitement of it all, of fulfilling one of her fantasies,

²⁷Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 1132.

²⁸Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 329.

²⁹Ibid., p. 348.

of skillfully manipulating the supposed manipulator? And all of these twists of audience perception are artfully guided by the subtextual indications of the author. The role of Muriel Tate must be a challenging and satisfying one to play, because, in this play, neither the conflict nor her part in it is as obvious and blatant as it would at first appear. The struggle for power between Muriel Tate and Jesse Kiplinger is surely an interpersonal one, but it is a political conflict as well, because there is also an impersonal, subtle, subtextual manipulation for control going on between the two of them throughout the playlet. They interrelate as political entities because neither reveals his (her) full and clear intentions to the other, but, in fact, makes statements and declarations quite contrary to his (her) ultimate intentions. One of the participants seems, at first, to be totally on the defensive, outflanked, outmaneuvered, and with no weaponry on her side; yet, as in the martial arts, Muriel soon comes (perhaps) to use the weight of Jesse's own attack against him; at play's end, she has him where he wants her, doesn't she? The audience is left to wonder just who seduced whom, and who, in fact, outmaneuvered and manipulated whom to achieve his (her) ultimate goal?

The plays discussed in this chapter obviously adhere to no one distinct theory of comedy; instead, each reflects a different theory, or set of theories. The plays herein range, arguably, from Simon's best work (The Odd Couple), to his least successful one (The Star-Spangled Girl). They do, however, share the underlying unity of bringing friends (or ex-friends in The Sunshine Boys and in "Visitor from Hollywood" in Plaza Suite) into conflict and reassessment of

their friendships. In two of these plays, Simon ventures into a consideration of characters (in The Star-Spangled Girl) and ages (in The Sunshine Boys) with which he has had no intimate, direct personal experience, a practice that is not characteristic of his dramaturgy. Also uncharacteristic of his dramaturgy, but discussed in this chapter, is a play by Simon which does not include, and does not even make any reference to, members of a family (The Star-Spangled Girl), and a playlet which features two married couples, but involves no serious, genuine, meaningful intrafamily conflict ("Visitors from Chicago," the fourth, final playlet of California Suite).

The plays discussed in this chapter also share the fundamental thematic core of the attempted sustaining-although-restructuring of the friendships: Felix's neuroses, Willie's irascibility, Norman's passion for Sophie, the Hollanders' and Franklyns' involuntary mania for physical havoc, and Muriel Tate's and Jesse Kiplinger's subtextual jousting threaten established (and/or assumed) relationships; in each case, the relationships, although chaotically jolted, seem to remain at (or to become better than) the previous status quo at play's end, without the total destruction of any of the friendships, and with noticeable improvement to some of them.

CHAPTER VI:

FLIES TO WANTON BOYS

"Life has not only been very kind to me, it goes out of its way to ignore me;"¹ thus speaks Barney Cashman, the contemporary everyman, protagonist of Simon's Last of the Red Hot Lovers. What conflict can there be between this man and his fate, his environment -- his life -- when that very life "goes out of its way" to ignore him? Of course that very indifference of life toward Barney Cashman and toward the people he represents -- Simon's target audience -- is in itself the impetus for the conflict. Barney is crying out to life, "Why don't you notice me? Why don't you use me? Why don't you excite me?" Whereas Mel Edison, the protagonist of The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and Joe Benjamin, the protagonist of God's Favorite, could scream at life -- and with good reason -- to leave them alone (in fact, Joe does cry out during his ordeal, "Okay, God. What's next? . . . What's next, God?"²), Barney Cashman actively seeks -- and seeks to create -- a disturbance to his routine. These three plays by Neil Simon -- Last of the Red Hot Lovers, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and God's Favorite -- present the two extreme aspects of the fundamental trials of contemporary man, especially of Simon's chosen audience -- the upper-middle-class and middle-class New Yorker: Barney's life is

¹Neil Simon, Last of the Red Hot Lovers (New York: Samuel French, 1970), p. 28.

²Neil Simon, God's Favorite (New York: Samuel French, 1975), p. 76.

tame, uneventful, and downright dull, while the lives of Mel and Joe go from relative calm to chaos. Of course their individual conflicts with life also engender internal personal crises; however, since the causes of these internal conflicts are from without them, their major power struggles -- with fate, with environment, with life -- will be discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, the internal struggles these three Simon protagonists face should be mentioned at this point: In Barney's case it is the excitement and chaos of life that are conspicuous by their absence, in Mel's case it is being fired -- among other contemporary assaults on one's sanity and entity, and in Joe's case it is the avalanche of "the thousand and one natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

In the next chapter -- "Me and My (Interior) Shadow" -- the focus will shift to those struggles for power that are within oneself, for although both Evy Meara in The Gingerbread Lady (insufficient love and failing career) and George Schneider in Chapter Two (the death of his beloved first wife) have stimuli from without that engender their personal crises, the crucial interaction in these two plays is not between them and their fate but within themselves to regain (if not to reconstruct) themselves.

The three plays to be discussed in this chapter reflect the struggle for power between man and his fate. Mel and Edna Edison, in The Prisoner of Second Avenue, want only to maintain their equilibrium against the seemingly endless assaults of contemporary urban life; in this, Simon's blackest comedy, there is no triumph for them at play's end, but only the promise of perhaps being able to survive another day to seek their delicate balance. Joe Benjamin, in God's

Favorite, fights a force greater than himself -- as well as fighting his own lack of will, resolve, and self-discipline -- in his struggle not to renounce God at any cost; for Joe, there is triumph, exaltation, and the reclamation of his son at the end of his ordeal. And, as stated above, Barney Cashman, in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, resents (mildly and meekly) fate for having left him alone, and struggles against the placidity, timidity, and eventlessness of his life. Susanne Langer provides a theoretical foundation for the first two plays, and, inversely, a theoretical foundation for Last of the Red Hot Lovers as well:

The illusion of life which the comic poet creates is the oncoming future fraught with dangers and opportunities, that is, with physical or social events occurring by chance and building up the coincidences with which individuals cope according to their lights. This ineluctable future -- ineluctable because its countless factors are beyond human knowledge and control -- is Fortune. Destiny in the guise of Fortune is the fabric of comedy; it is developed by comic action, which is the upset and recovery of the protagonist's equilibrium, his contest with the world and his triumph by wit, luck, personal power, or even humorous, or ironical, or philosophical acceptance of mischance.³

Ms. Langer also makes a specific formulation that is directly relevant to Last of the Red Hot Lovers; she provides a theoretical explanation of why, in this comedy, Barney Cashman says, "life has not only been very kind to me, it goes out of its way to ignore me," and why this statement is the thematic core of Last of the Red Hot Lovers:

³Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 330.

. . . no matter how people contrive to become reconciled to their mortality, it puts its stamp on their conception of life; since the instinctive struggle to go on living is bound to meet defeat in the end, they look for as much life as possible between birth and death -- for adventure, variety and intensity of experience . . .⁴

Last of the Red Hot Lovers, a comedy consisting of three one-act episodes, is Simon's Reigen of sorts; but, instead of one lover after another changing partners in every scene, as in Reigen, in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, Barney Cashman changes potential lovers in every act, only to settle, at play's end, for the acceptance of his tranquil, domestic fate, by calling his wife from his mother's apartment and inviting her there, to the site of his three failed romantic trysts. Earlier, we saw the application of Northrop Frye's "comic Oedipus situation" theory to Simon's dramaturgy; here, in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, we see Barney Cashman, restaurateur and man of means, attempting to have his affairs in his mother's little apartment in Manhattan; is this perhaps a subliminal Oedipus fixation gone rampant in contemporary comedy? Or is it the trivialization and debasement of pseudo-Oedipal symbolism made palatable for Simon's target audience? Or is it merely the tightfistedness and peculiar conservatism of Barney Cashman? It is, no doubt, all of the above.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers is a vicarious journey for Simon's target audience along the precarious precipice of potential adultery; but, like the members of Simon's target audience do, or as they wish they could do, Barney's

⁴Ibid., p. 331.

flirtations with adultery end with nothing more intimate than flirting, and Simon kindly and considerately (and cunningly) concludes the play for his target audience with the suggestion of a pathetic yet somehow proper domestic tryst -- the hint of an anticlimactic, bathetic komos of sorts -- between Barney and his wife in his mother's apartment.

Mel Edison, in Prisoner of Second Avenue, Joe Benjamin, in God's Favorite, and especially Barney Cashman in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, are thoroughgoing representations of Simon's target audience; they are the contemporary urban/suburban upper-middle-class American everyman of New York. Simon takes every opportunity to stress the importance of their identification with Simon's target audience, and with the heritage, environment, and trials and problems of Simon's target audience; thus, Barney Cashman traces his heritage in Last of the Red Hot Lovers:

BARNEY: Actually I'm part Russian and part Lithuanian. My real name isn't Cashman. It's Czernivekoski. When my grandfather came to this country someone told him if he has any trouble with the immigration office at Ellis Island he should give the man some cash. So when they asked my grandfather his name and they couldn't understand him, he gave the man some cash. So that's the name they gave him. Cashman.⁵

⁵Simon, Last of the Red Hot Lovers, p. 8.

And, when Barney explains his journey toward potential adultery to his first hoped-for conquest, Elaine Navazio, he speaks for a generation of discontentedly content Americans (and, he unknowingly voices the comedy theory of Susanne Langer as he speaks):

BARNEY: I'm sure it will come as no great shock to you, but you are the first "attempted" extramarital affair for me in twenty-three years of marriage. I've never even kissed another woman. . . . I don't smoke, I don't gamble, and you've had more to drink this afternoon than I've had in my whole life. I've never had a fistfight, never had a broken bone, never had a temperature over a hundred and two. . . . Life has not only been very kind to me, it goes out of its way to ignore me. . . . I've got three kids I'm very proud of, a house I've worked very hard for and a wife who is not extraordinary, not what you would call an exciting, vivacious woman, but one who is kind, considerate, devoted and that I happen to love. So why after twenty-three years do I write my mother's address on the back of a check, buy a bottle of Scotch with two glasses and pray to God I never get caught? Why? I'll tell you why. . . . I don't know. . . . I'm forty-seven years old and for the first time in my life I think about dying. The thought of death has now

become a part of my life. I read the obituaries every day just for the satisfaction of not seeing my name there. . . . But it's inevitable, it's going to happen someday, maybe sooner than I think. And I ask myself, "Have you enjoyed it, Barney? Was it a really terrific forty-seven years?" And you know what my answer is? "Well, I wouldn't say terrific. It was nice." . . . The sum total of my existence is nice. I will go to my grave having led a nice life. And I will have a nice funeral and they will bury me in my nice blue suit. And my wife will weep for me and in six months she will marry another nice fellow . . . maybe even give him my brown sports jacket. And I wouldn't condemn her for it. Life must go on. . . . But while it's going on, shouldn't it be better than just "nice"? Shouldn't there be something else besides opening the restaurant eleven o'clock every morning? . . . Couldn't I just once give in to my fantasies, my secret dreams, experiencing things, emotions, stimulants I've never experienced before? . . . I wanted to know what it was like with another woman. . . . I wanted it to be memorable -- an experience so rewarding and fulfilling that it would last me the rest of my life . . . And then I'd go back to opening the restaurant at eleven o'clock in the morning -- but knowing that for one brief afternoon I

had changed the pattern of my life, and for once I didn't just exist -- I lived!⁶

Elaine prompts this outburst from Barney by stating the pragmatic philosophy that is the direct antithesis of Barney's position:

ELAINE: You hypocrite! You soul-searching, finger-smelling, hypocritical son of a bitch! Who are you to tell anybody how to go through life? What would you have done if I came in here all fluttery and blushing and "Och, Mr. Cashman, don't put your hand there, I'm a married woman"? Were you going to tell me how much you respect me, admire me and, at the moment of truth, even love me? You know damn well tomorrow you'd be back behind that counter opening clams and praying to Christ I'd never come back in your restaurant. And you know something? That's the way it should be. Forgive me for the terrible, sinful thing I'm about to say but I happen to like the pure physical act of making love. It warms me, it stimulates me and it makes me feel like a woman -- but that's another ugly story. That's what I came up here for and that's what you were expecting. But don't give me, "When I was nine years old my mother ran off with the butcher and I've been looking for someone to love ever since." I don't know your problems and I don't care. Keep

⁶Ibid., pp. 28-30.

your savory swordfish
succotash stories to your-
self. No one really cares
about anything or anyone
in this world except himself,
and there's only one way to
get through with your sanity.
If you can't taste it, touch
it or smell it, forget it!⁷

Then, at the end of Act One, the worldly Elaine again speaks as the antithetical, sophisticated alter ego of contemporary man, trying to minimize, via cynical, comic rhetoric, Barney's conflict with a too-comfortable, yet ever-insistent mortality:

BARNEY: I had hoped you'd understand,
but I didn't expect it.

ELAINE: No, listen, it was terrifically
entertaining. I really enjoyed
it. There's one or two reasons,
though, why I couldn't feel too
sympathetic for the hero. . . .
In the first place, there is a
very good possibility that that
forty-four-year-old woman in
Newark, New Jersey, was my
mother. That'll give you some
idea of my background. In the
second place, any man who ex-
pects to have a beautiful, memo-
rable and enchanting day of ho-
nest love with a woman he picks
up in a fish restaurant is
either sexually retarded or a
latent idiot! And in the third
place, no one gives a good crap
about you dying because a lot
of people discovered it ahead
of you. We're all dying, Mr.
Cashman. As a matter of fact,
I myself passed away about six

⁷Ibid., pp. 26-27.

months ago. I'm just hanging around to clean up some business affairs. . . . Together, Barney, we blew one of the very few free afternoons we have alloted to us in this life. But I'm not putting the blame on you. It serves me right. If I had a craving for corned beef and cabbage I'd be in some big Irishman's apartment right now having the time of my life. . . . C'est la vie! (At the door.) Good luck, Barney, in your quest for the Impossible Dream.⁸

Elaine is outside the societal norm represented in the play by Barney. She is one-dimensional. Elaine Navazio is appetite without taste, she is body without soul, she is, as she maintains, sex without love, form without substance. The struggle to control the one shared afternoon of their lives ends in a draw: neither wins, but both lose. Barney loses an iota of his idealism, and Elaine loses a potential afternoon of debauchery. The id of one person clashes with the superego of another, resulting in frustration and lack of fulfillment for both.

Whereas Elaine Navazio functions as antagonist to Barney and his philosophy, bohemian Bobbi Michele, his intended paramour of Act Two, represents a world, and a generation, that neither Barney nor Simon's target audience can understand. Of course Bobbi is a "nice," "safe" eccentric for Simon's audience -- and Barney -- to gawk at, without having to get too close. She is like some exotic,

⁸Ibid., pp. 30-31.

soon-to-be-extinct bird in a glass cage -- interesting for a time, but not threatening, and, certainly without substance and meaning beyond that temporary interest. Sure, she is a masochistic paranoiac who induces Barney to smoke marijuana, but she is the typical, ultimately-harmless comedy kook. Her allusively suggestive stories are the closest Barney and Simon's target audience ever get to bohemian, uninhibited lasciviousness; as in other of Simon's plays, but especially in this one -- through Bobbi Michele and her stories -- Simon gives his audience a titillation that -- like Gypsy Rose Lee's strip tease -- ultimately reveals nothing of a truly carnal interest. Bobbi Michele is the conduit by which Simon's target audience can comfortably say to each other, "So you see what happens from being a hippie?" Even in the troubled world of Barney Cashman, Bobbi Michele is the abnormal comedic character who is used to demonstrate and promote the primacy of the mundane, terribly imperfect, yet ineluctable -- for Simon's target audience -- norm.

A paradoxical representative of that norm is Jeanette Fisher, Barney's final attempted assignation. Whereas Elaine Navazio and Bobbi Michele are totally outside of Barney's world, Jeanette, his wife's friend, is very much within it, in fact so much so, as to be the pathetic yang to Barney's bathetic yin. She expresses -- she embodies -- all of the psychoanalytically-induced neuroses pregnant or dormant in Simon's target audience: Jeanette Fisher knows very well what melancholia is:

JEANETTE: I'll tell you what melancholia is, Barney, because I've had it for the last eight months. It's total and complete despair. It's waking up each morning of

your life not wanting anything, not hoping, not caring, not needing. You don't pray for happiness because you don't believe it exists, and you don't wish for death because if you don't exist, then death is meaningless. All that's left is a quiet, endless, bottomless, relentless, eternal, infinite gloom. That's melancholia.⁹

And she certainly knows how to think logically, too (Thelma is Barney's wife, Mel is Jeanette's husband):

JEANETTE: Thelma is the only gentle, loving and decent woman I've ever met. She is unrepachable and incapable of deception. She is the epitome of decency. And the fact that you could doubt her is an act of indecency on your part. You are not a decent human being. Neither am I because I'm here with you, knowing what Thelma is. Neither is Mel, because he drove me to it. We are not decent people, Barney. Only Thelma is. But she thinks you're the most decent one of us all, so that makes her an idiot in my eyes. There are only indecent people or idiots in this world because that's all I ever see. And that's how I spend most of my day, thinking about things like that. Is it any wonder I take Digilene?¹⁰

⁹Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 65.

It is Jeanette's neurotic prodding that induces Barney to voice an epigram aimed directly at Simon's target audience: "It's not good for a marriage to test it too much."¹¹

Although she is laughable and neurotic, Jeanette is the laughable and neurotic part of Barney and of contemporary humanity. She is outside of the comic norm only insofar as she is nothing more than her neuroses, and she is nothing more, for Barney and for Simon's target audience.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers is a potential tragedy that becomes comedy by the very nature of the comic protagonist's attempt to gain (unknowingly, almost unconsciously) tragic stature; Barney Cashman, like Doctor Faustus, attempts to transcend the limitations of his mortality. In Barney's case, that limitation is his apparent fate to be doomed to a mundane, comfortable, strictly delimited existence. Yet, even his rebellion against fate is carried on within the most mundane and insipid parameters -- at the age of forty-seven, Barney Cashman wants not knowledge or power or grandeur or glory or immortality -- Barney Cashman wants to have an affair! The famous line from Marlowe's Doctor Faustus may be perversely trivialized to describe Barney Cashman: "Is this the man that shelled a thousand fish and stalked the topless bars of Long Island?" In a speech cited earlier, Elaine Navazio had said of Barney: "any man who expects to have a beautiful, memorable and enchanting day of honest love with a woman he picks up in a fish restaurant is either sexually retarded or a latent idiot;"¹² she might have added that any man who expects to transcend his mortality and challenge fate by having an affair in his

¹¹Ibid., p. 60. ¹²Ibid., p. 30.

mother's apartment while she is out is an apt comedic representative and symbol of the limits and pettiness of man in contemporary society, and that any man who fails three times at such a modest goal is an apt farcical representative and symbol of contemporary man.

Barney Cashman seeks to challenge the status quo of his life. The life of Mel Edison in The Prisoner of Second Avenue challenges him. Mel would gladly settle for the mundane, workaday routine that so oppresses Barney. The complete kaleidoscope of potential horrors that can assault the contemporary urban New Yorker assaults Mel Edison, and he does what any contemporary New Yorker would do when being thus assaulted -- he has a nervous breakdown.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers has its moments of bleakness, but The Prisoner of Second Avenue is Simon's black comedy. (See the discussion of this play in Chapter II, "The Plays," pp. 45-48.) Mel Edison is the quintessential comic hero caught in a tragic situation; he wants only to go on living as he has been living, to maintain the rhythm of life, to undergo the established patterns of his history and his culture; but his environment will not allow it. The "Great Chain of Being" is disturbed and violated in The Prisoner of Second Avenue as surely as it is in King Lear. Mel himself says in a moment of paranoid accuracy: "It is the sudden, irrevocable deterioration of the spirit of man. It is man undermining himself, causing a self-willed, self-imposed, self-evident self destruction."¹³

¹³Neil Simon, The Prisoner of Second Avenue (New York: Samuel French, 1972), p. 52.

All that can go wrong for Mel and Edna Edison does go wrong, and Simon's target audience must feel a strong sense of recognition and sympathy for their trials. While Mel and Edna are alone (in the first three scenes) on stage, the catalogue of their catastrophes is enough to make even Job (or Joe Benjamin) sympathetic: Mel loses his job, nothing in their expensive apartment is functioning properly, they are besieged by their neighbors, their home is burglarized leaving them with practically nothing, ad. infinitum. For these first three scenes, The Prisoner of Second Avenue is a comic Simonesque comingling of Beckett and Pinter. Then, for the final two scenes of the play, during which Mel's brother and sisters appear, the play loses some of its integrity by losing its sense of isolation, and by diluting the plot from man against fate to petty intrafamily squabbling. Although it is more Simon than Beckett/Pinter during the final two scenes, The Prisoner of Second Avenue nevertheless has a chilling ominousness about it. (See pp. 45-48.)

The conflict between Mel and Edna and their fate is the conflict between the members of Simon's target audience and their individual and collective fates: It is the struggle to fulfill one's destiny -- to live one's life -- while dealing with "the thousand and one natural shocks that flesh is heir to;" and those shocks are coming in profuse waves at Mel and Edna Edison in The Prisoner of Second Avenue, as they so often seem to come at the New Yorkers in the audience who also often feel like prisoners of their environment and fate.

The questions the play raises are those that mankind has always asked about its own existence;¹⁴ The Prisoner of Second Avenue sets those questions within a contemporary context. The questions are those of philosophy; in The Prisoner of Second Avenue, these questions are couched in a comedy, because Mel and Edna Edison, Neil Simon, and the audience want to accept the answers, and will even accept (as they must) living in the shadows of the questions with no answers in sight. If the answers were sought at any cost, that would constitute a tragedy; if both the questions and answers were to be considered or rendered meaningless, irrelevant, or nonexistent, that would be the marrow of absurdism.

Joe Benjamin, in God's Favorite, is riddled with questions; he is also riddled, ultimately, with almost every physical and personal misfortune known to man. One of his major problems -- his deteriorating relationship with his son, David -- has been discussed in a previous chapter. Whatever conflicts he may have within himself are reflected in the struggle for power over himself between him and his destiny; and of course his destiny is to be tested in his fealty to and reverence for God. Joe is of course the protagonist of God's Favorite; the real antagonist is whatever force there is that exists within a man that would, in the face of calamities, cause him to renounce his faith. The

- ¹⁴Some of these questions are:
- 1) Is there a God?
 - 2) If there is, why does He sometimes seem so malevolent or indifferent?
 - 3) Why live?
 - 4) Can man coexist peacefully with his fellow man?
 - 5) Am I my brother's keeper?

physical representation of that antagonistic inclination -- the messenger and medium for renunciation, as it were -- is Sidney Lipton, a character so coy, fey, arch, and unbearable as to render the trials of Joe B. (Job) pleasant in contrast to his personality. Simon attempts to make Sidney Lipton -- messenger boy for some daemonic power -- as human, as imperfect, and as neurotic as possible; Sidney is a pathetic creature who can see nothing without his glasses, dresses shabbily, and is generally oppressed by everything; if Joe Benjamin is the contemporary rendition of the mythical Job, then Sidney Lipton is the universal embodiment of the eternal sad sack (in Yiddish, a schmendrick). In an attempt to give him metaphysical dimension, Simon has written for him pseudo-philosophical ramblings that are sophomoric and puerile. In all, Sidney Lipton is singularly unattractive; he is perhaps the most offensive character in Simon's dramaturgy.

The character of Sidney Lipton is a considerable detriment to the play. Another detriment is Simon's inability to establish Joe's faith in God convincingly and profoundly enough to render his resistance to the renunciation of that faith a true and meaningful test of a sincere and genuine faith. His faith seems like his overall personality -- practical and passionless, with none of the genuine "passion" of a truly religious person, especially a religious character who is the protagonist of a play that centers on the intensity of that very religious faith.

Joe Benjamin is wealthier than most of the members of Simon's target audience, but he is representative of them in his personality, character, ancestry, and philosophy. When he describes his history and justifies himself, he also

allies himself with the target audience of his author (note the similarity of his speech to the autobiographical monologue of Barney Cashman in Last of the Red Hot Lovers):

JOE: . . . There was a time in my life when the holes in my socks were so big, you could put them on from either end . . . I grew up in a tenement in New York. My mother, my father and eleven kids in one and a half rooms. We had two beds and a cot, you had to take a number off the wall to go to sleep . . . My father was five foot three, weighed a hundred and twenty-seven pounds. He had a bad heart, bad lungs, bad liver and bad kidneys. He was a piano mover. He died at the age of thirty-two from an acute attack of everything . . . My mother had to take a job in a sweatshop working six days a week, fourteen hours a day. At night she washed floors at Madison Square Garden, and on Sundays she sold hot sweet potatoes on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Broadway. What she didn't sell was dinner for the rest of the week. Sweet potatoes every night. On Thanksgiving she'd stuff the sweet potato with a little white potato . . . The clothes we wore were made out of rags she found in the street, or a pair of curtains somebody threw away . . . You know what it was for a young boy growing up in a tough neighborhood in East New York to wear curtains? Can you picture that? Fairies used to beat me up . . . 15

¹⁵Simon, God's Favorite, pp. 23-25.

In this, his longest speech in the play, Joe goes on to describe how he and his ten siblings survived poverty and the Depression thanks to his mother's efforts and her faith in God. He then explains how he came to own his corrugated box company and to achieve great wealth. Simon allies Joe Benjamin to his chosen audience through this speech by presenting him as a poor boy from the tenements of East New York who made a "success" of himself. The playwright similarly allied Barney Cashman to that same audience through speeches in which Barney described his European ancestry, the arrival to the United States of his grandfather at Ellis Island, and Barney's own achievement of "success" -- his own business, his own home, a devoted wife, three children, and "three weeks every August in Sarasota Springs."¹⁶

Mel Edison, the protagonist of The Prisoner of Second Avenue, does not have his own business -- he works in an office in Manhattan (or, more correctly, used to work in an office in Manhattan), and of course lives there as well, like many members of Simon's chosen audience, while Barney Cashman and Joe Benjamin live and have their businesses outside of Manhattan, in the suburbs of New York, like many others of the members of Simon's audience. And many of the crises that befall Mel Edison have indeed befallen many New Yorkers over the years.

So, Neil Simon has neatly identified the protagonists of these three plays (Last of the Red Hot Lovers, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, God's Favorite) with the members of his chosen audience; and through these plays Simon is saying to that audience: "This could happen to you -- if it hasn't already." And his audience is responding with a

¹⁶Simon, Last of the Red Hot Lovers, p. 29.

collective sigh that says, "I know, I know." And, like a subliminal Greek chorus, Simon is telling us through these plays how pathetic, and bathetic, man can be, and how quickly he can experience a reversal of his fortunes at the hands of (the) God(s).

Like many other of Simon's protagonists, Joe Benjamin, in God's Favorite, Mel (and Edna) Edison, in The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and Barney Cashman, in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, are in their forties. Joe's, Mel's and Edna's, and Barney's struggles for power against their fates may be viewed as midlife crises insofar as those struggles engender the internal conflicts that lead to the confrontation between a human being and his acute realization of his own mortality. The crises in the lives of these characters demand of them self-discipline and self-control to accept their fate. In the next chapter we shall examine the lives of two other of Simon's protagonists who experience "midlife crises;" however, in the cases of Evy Meara in The Gingerbread Lady and George Schneider in Chapter Two, the conflicts arising from these crises originate essentially from within, and, like the ripples made by a stone thrown into a lake, then radiate outward to affect those around them.

CHAPTER VII:

ME AND MY (INTERIOR) SHADOW

All organisms have internal conflicts; they are impelled and compelled by contradictory impulses in opposite directions. Human beings have innumerable internal conflicts that are not necessarily physical but mental -- internal conflicts that call for internal monologues to resolve them. The ultimate exploration is not of the oceans or of outer space; it is of inner space -- it is the constant discovery of oneself. The foremost internal conflict for a human being is to discipline oneself, to master oneself. This is a lifelong struggle that is never totally satisfactorily resolved. It is a struggle that characters in drama -- especially in and after the work of Henrik Ibsen -- undergo every night on the stages of the western world.

All of the characters in the stage plays of Neil Simon have of course struggled with and within themselves -- as have all human beings -- some profoundly, some cursorily. (Some of those internal struggles have been discussed in previous chapters.) But the two Simon characters who have faced the most far-reaching and most profound self-examinations, internal conflicts, and personal crises are Evy Meara in The Gingerbread Lady and George Schneider in Chapter Two.

In most of his plays, the audience discovers Simon's characters in the midst of a traumatic situation (as they discover most characters in drama); in the cases of Evy Meara and George Schneider, The Gingerbread Lady and Chapter Two,

respectively, are plays about the crisis that obtains after the traumatic situation has, apparently, subsided; they are plays about attempts at regaining and reclaiming oneself after emotionally and physically draining incidents in one's life.

The Gingerbread Lady is the only one of the plays herein considered that Simon has not called a comedy; he called it simply "a new play," but it is indeed a comedy. Simon is again portraying, in The Gingerbread Lady, the essence of Susanne Langer's theory of comedy:

Life is teleological, the rest of nature is, apparently, mechanical; to maintain the pattern of vitality in a non-living universe is the most elementary instinctual purpose. An organism tends to keep its equilibrium amid the bombardment of aimless forces that beset it, to regain equilibrium when it has been disturbed, and to pursue a sequence of actions dictated by the need of keeping all its interdependent parts constantly renewed, their structure intact.¹

The Gingerbread Lady is a play about the attempt by Evy Meara, and her friends, to sustain the rhythm of life, and, at its end, of the ongoing sustenance of her life by her daughter, Polly: The komos at the end of The Gingerbread Lady is one of harmony, understanding, and great closeness between mother and daughter. There is no grand celebration, and all will not be rosy in the future, but at least there is the small victory of daughter sustaining mother, and of the rhythm of life continuing, if only for the moment of the final curtain.

¹Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 327.

Evy Meara has already lost the struggle for self-mastery once -- she became an alcoholic; when The Gingerbread Lady begins, Simon prepares the audience for her second chance at winning the war of self in the battle against the bottle. Her struggle within herself is paralleled by the internal struggles of her two closest friends, Toby Landau and Jimmy Perry; as the card players are extensions of Felix and Oscar in The Odd Couple, so Toby and Jimmy are extensions of Evy in The Gingerbread Lady. Toby is fighting a losing battle against the aging process, and against the loss to that aging process of her youthful beauty, and Jimmy is fighting against the despair of a deflated self-image and a lack of career fulfillment in middle age. There is a constant air of tension about all three of them; by contrast, Evy's daughter, Polly, emanates a calm and self-control that seem well beyond her years. Ironically, she is the one most under control, much more so than the so-called "adults." Her relationship with her mother recalls a noted Wordsworth line in transmogrified paraphrase: "The child is mother of the woman."

Evy Meara's excessive and unsatisfied need for affection expresses itself in a gargantuan need for sexual fulfillment; she cannot satisfy that need, and, perhaps the inability to conquer her sexuality and gain sufficient romantic love drive her to drink. Now that she has returned home from the sanitarium she again commences the struggle of attempted self-control; and she herself feels that this may be her last chance; she says to her daughter, Polly:

EVY: . . . I figure, pussycat, that
I have only one more chance at
this human being business . . .
and if I blow it this time,

they'll probably bury me in some
distillery in Kentucky. . . .²

Evy is neurotically fixated on her sexual needs; it is the focal force of her life. Toby and Jimmy are also neurotically fixated on one part of their lives: Toby has a fetish about her once-youthful beauty and spends her entire life attempting to sustain it; her reward for her efforts is a prospective divorce -- her husband wants to leave her; Jimmy still treasures the adolescent dream of "stardom" -- it brings him nothing but despair and frustration. Perhaps the theme of The Gingerbread Lady is that unless one's life is balanced -- rather than concentrated on one aspect of life at the expense of the others -- one cannot avoid neurosis, frustration, and despair.

The Gingerbread Lady is a comedy that ends with a general feeling of despair, despite the fact that mother and daughter are close at its curtain. The comic rhythm of life that continues and will continue after play's end is bittersweet, sadly human, and not at all funny, except for the wisecracks. Toby assesses the situation of Evy and her friends incisively when she says the following to Evy:

TOBY: You're not twenty-two, you're
forty-three. And you're an
alcoholic with no sense of
morality or responsibility.
You've never had a lasting
relationship with anyone who
wasn't as weak or as helpless
as yourself. So you have
friends like Jimmy and me.
Misfits who can't do any more

²Neil Simon, The Gingerbread Lady
(New York: Samuel French, 1971), p. 29.

than pick up your discarded
clothes and empty bottles.
We hold each other up because
none of us has the strength
to do it alone.³

By contrast to this group of weaklings, George Schneider, the protagonist of Chapter Two, is a relatively strong man who has been broken by the loss of his beloved first wife and who, during the course of the play, gains the strength to accept and give love again. Jennie Malone has the same problem to a lesser degree; she is rebounding from a divorce, but she is not as profoundly in pain as George, and is much more ready, willing and capable of sharing love; it is, in fact, the challenge of her love that forces George to confront his own internal crisis.

Just as Evy Meara's friends try to support her and fail because of their own weaknesses, so the support that George and Jennie receive from his brother, Leo, and her friend, Faye, respectively, is of minimal value because they (Leo and Faye) are embroiled in their own internal struggles stemming from romantic difficulties.

Each of the four characters of Chapter Two may be categorized by one adjective, that adjective being descriptive both of the character's personality and of the source of his/her internal conflict. George is morose, Jennie "perfect," Leo blasé, and Faye anxious; however, despite George's mood at play's beginning, the characters in Chapter Two are not representative of "humours;" they are merely principally affected in romantic involvements by those adjectival characteristics.

³Ibid., p. 68.

George's remorseful sullenness evaporates for a time, after he meets Jennie, then overtakes him again after they are married, then recedes again -- seemingly, hopefully never to return -- at play's end. Jennie's "perfectness" -- her seemingly flawless entity -- is too much for the despair-ridden George to accept, until play's end. Jennie, in fact, says of herself, in discussing her first marriage with Faye, while Faye is listing her (Jennie's) manifold perfections:

JENNIE: A perfect person. The
nuns loved it, but it
was murder on a marriage.⁴

Leo and Faye are bound to fail at any serious romantic involvement -- with each other, or with anyone else -- ironically, paradoxically, for the opposite reasons: he is too blasé and cursory about romance to give it sufficient meaning and weight in his life, while Faye focuses on romance so emphatically and anxiously that it is bound to elude her.

George and Jennie are very much in love with each other, even at the height of their mutual personal crises; Faye aspires to that type of love; Leo is a counterweight to the romanticism of the other three; he is a pragmatic aromanticist; he wants immediate gratification or none at all:

LEO: . . . I need something new.
It's why I like show business.
There's another opening every
three weeks. I can't be mono-
gamous, Faye. What can I do,

⁴Neil Simon, Chapter Two (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 12.

take shots for it? But in our system I'm put down as a social criminal. I can't be faithful to my wife, and I hate the guilt that comes with playing around. So I compromise. I have lots of unpleasurable affairs. And what makes it worse -- I really do care for Marilyn. I can't stop, and I don't expect her to understand. So we end up hurting each other. I don't like it, Faye. I don't like crawling into bed at two o'clock in the morning and feeling the back of a cold, angry woman. And I don't like you coming up here under any false pretenses. I would love to make love to you, but that's the end of the sentence. I don't want a fine romance. I don't want to dance on the ceiling or have my heart stand still when "she" walks in the door. Because I really don't want to hurt anyone anymore. All I want is a little dispassionate passion . . . Let George and Jennie handle all the romance for the East Coast. The man is half-crazed right now, and he's welcome to it . . . I'll tell you what I do want, Faye. I want a woman who looks exactly like you and feels like you and thinks exactly like me.⁵

In the following exchange with George, Leo expounds further on the deflating, universal tragedy that is marriage in the eyes of a jaundiced participant therein:

⁵Ibid., pp. 112-113.

LEO: . . . I don't know what the hell I'm holding on to any way. I swear to God, I'll never get married again. You spend half your married life fighting to get back the feeling you had just before you got married.

GEORGE: Come on, Leo. You've got a good marriage -- I know.

LEO: Really? I'll invite you to sleep in our bedroom one night, you can listen. I'll tell you, George. The trouble with marriage is that it's relentless. Every morning when you wake up, it's still there. If I could just get a leave of absence every once in a while. A two-week leave of absence. I used to get them all the time in the Army and I always came back . . . I don't know. I think it was different for you and Barbara. I'll tell you the truth, I always thought the two of you were a little crazy. But that's what made it work for you. You had a real bond of lunacy between you . . . Marilyn has no craziness. No fantasies. No uncharted territories to explore. I'm sitting there with maps for places in my mind I've never been, and she won't even pack an overnight bag. In eleven years she never once let me make love to her with the lights on. I said to her, "Marilyn, come on, trust me, I won't tell anybody." So we stop growing, stop changing. And we stagnate . . .

in our comfortable little
house in the country . . .
Oh, well, another thirty,
thirty-five years and it'll
all be over, right?⁶

Chapter Two ends in komos after the komos; George and Jennie marry earlier in the play (that is the formal, ceremonial komos), but the true romantic harmony between them (that is the spirit of komos) begins only at the final curtain.

Chapter Two is an uneven play, and a flawed stage work in several respects. The audience cannot be sure whether the counterpointed romantic plot and the anti-romantic subplot are intended to communicate the concept that people get out of love what they put into it, or that humans are manipulated by love without having any significant control over it or their involvement in it. The play is much too intimate and personal to be an objective work of dramatic art. The courting of Jennie by George is charmingly portrayed -- by extensive use of the telephone (see the Appendix) -- but the play does not sustain itself well despite the incipient crises of the second act. It is a rather novelistic play with not enough dramatic "action" or genuine "comedy" in it. And Chapter Two adds evidence to the notion that love -- "true love" -- is difficult, if not impossible to portray on stage, and that the effort at doing so may easily lead to boredom and dramatic inaction at some point in the play.

⁶Ibid., pp. 61-62.

In Chapter Two Neil Simon relates a personal internal crisis to members of his audience; they listen like old friends (the old friends that they by now are to Simon), they sympathize, occasionally they laugh, but they cannot sit back -- at a "distance" -- and enjoy the "comedy" Simon claims to have written. Simon began his playwriting career with a personal reminiscence (Come Blow Your Horn), but he himself was far enough distanced from it, in terms both of time and emotion, to be able to render it with the objectivity that a true comedy needs from its author; in "Chapter Two, a new comedy by Neil Simon,"⁷ there is too much Neil Simon and not enough comedy.

⁷Ibid., title page.

CONCLUSIONS

The stage plays of Neil Simon represent various manifestations of the struggle for personal power as contemporary comedy. His plays are written primarily for, and about, middle and upper-middle class New Yorkers, and in most cases reflect those conflicts that are most relevant and important to that audience. The conflicts with which his plays deal may be subdivided into five major categories: parent/child, mate/mate, friend/friend, self/environment (fate), and self/self.

Simon contends that there are no villains in his plays, but that life is the villain; the representation of human struggles in his plays reflect and validate this contention.

Simon began his playwriting career with a play that portrayed the conventional parent/child conflict of New Comedy, a conflict that is the foundation of most comedy subsequent to the work of Menander, according to the comedy theory of Northrop Frye; however, that first play of Simon's -- Come Blow Your Horn -- diverges from Frye's theory in one crucial respect: Frye maintains that in New Comedy, and in the subsequent comedies influenced by it, the juvenile -- who is the comic hero -- triumphs at play's end over the senex (who is usually his father), and over the values and the society that the senex represents; in Come Blow Your Horn, it is the father of Alan Baker, the protagonist, and,

by extension and implication, the father's value system and society that vanquish "young" Alan. Another novel, interesting contrast between New Comedy and Come Blow Your Horn is the relative ages of the hero and heroine in each: in New Comedy, and in most of its subsequent manifestations, the young innamorati are in their teens, or, at worst, in their early twenties; in Come Blow Your Horn, Alan Baker is 33, and Connie Dayton, his innamorata, is not far behind.

This theory, which Frye calls "the comic Oedipus situation," is also applicable to other of Simon's plays: it is the disguised thematic foundation of the farcical third playlet of Plaza Suite, entitled "Visitor from Forest Hills," in which the juvenile (although not the protagonist of the playlet) is much younger than Alan Baker; he also triumphs over the senex, Roy Hubley (who is the protagonist of the playlet), despite the fact that he (the juvenile, Borden Eisler) appears for only a brief moment toward the end of the play and has only one line of dialogue. In fact, because of the brevity and nonchalance of his appearance, as it contrasts with the frantic-but-failed efforts of the senex-protagonist, this playlet is an almost ideal farcical realization of Frye's "comic Oedipus situation," with the unique variation of the extremely limited appearance on stage of the juvenile and of the ingenue (Borden's fiancée, and Roy's daughter, Mimsey, who also appears only at play's end, and says only three words of dialogue).

Both Come Blow Your Horn and "Visitor from Forest Hills" in Plaza Suite end with the assertion of the forthcoming marriage of the innamorati in each play, thus fulfilling the identities of these plays as contemporary versions of New Comedy according to the comedy theory of Northrop Frye.

In God's Favorite, the process of son replacing father, in a mutually acceptable manner, is an essential, although not the primary, theme of the play.

And "the comic Oedipus situation" idea has an interesting, although indirect and subtle relevance to Simon's The Gingerbread Lady, in which, at the end of the play, Polly, the daughter of the play's protagonist, troubled Evy Meara, has, in effect, switched familial roles with her mother, and will, the end of the play suggests, supply the parental requisites of discipline and levelheadedness both for herself and for her mother, who cannot, it appears, supply them either for her daughter or for herself.

Simon's second play, Barefoot in the Park, presents the first of the many manifestations of the mate-versus-mate conflict in his dramaturgy. In Barefoot in the Park, the struggle between mates takes place against the background of a marriage that is just beginning, a new, untested marriage in which both parties are attempting to establish their individual, clearly-defined places, and spaces, within a potentially permanent shared living arrangement.

In later plays, Simon covers other points on the marriage continuum in the conflict between spouses (and ex-spouses): In the first playlet of Plaza Suite, entitled "Visitor from Mamaroneck," Simon portrays what might happen to a young couple like Corie and Paul Bratter, of Barefoot in the Park, twenty-five years later. In this, Simon's most somber comedy, the protagonist, Karen Nash, attempts to resuscitate her failing marriage after twenty-five years, but cannot. Her husband, Sam, expresses during the play his desire to relive his successful life all over again, but, of

course, he cannot. Not only is there no "happy ending" for either the characters or the audience of "Visitor from Mamaroneck," but there is not even any suggestion of komos or of compromise at play's end, as there is at the end of Barefoot in the Park.

In "Visitor from New York," the first playlet of California Suite, ex-mates meet after nine years away from each other to decide with which one of them their eighteen-year-old daughter shall live. Despite considerable rancor on the part of Hannah Warren, the play's protagonist, there is an uneasy compromise between her and her ex-husband, Billy, at play's end.

The second playlet of California Suite, "Visitor from Philadelphia," depicts the aftermath of an almost unconscious act of adultery on the part of its protagonist, Marvin Michaels, and the subsequent discovery of that violation of the marriage agreement by his wife, Millie. She is at first angry, resentful, and vengeful, but she decides at play's end to accept the reality of her husband's misdeed and to continue the marriage.

In the third playlet of California Suite, "Visitors from London," Diana Nichols, a British actress who is in Los Angeles for the Academy Awards, and her husband, Sidney, a bisexual antiques dealer, are skillfully depicted by Simon as an odd couple who need each other and will stay together despite the fact that their marriage is obviously unsound in certain fundamental respects.

Finally, in Chapter Two, Simon presents another new marriage, but with a difference -- the marriage is between George Schneider and Jennie Malone, both of whom have been

married before. And, we come full circle in this play, because here again we have the same situation as in Barefoot in the Park -- two people starting a marriage and trying to establish their own ground rules within it. But in Chapter Two, the genuine love between George and Jennie is threatened by George's devotion to his beloved ex-wife (now dead), and his inability to bear the pain of sharing love again; however, love triumphs for George and Jennie at the end of Chapter Two.

Two theories of comedy are most relevant to each of these plays dealing with mate-versus-mate conflict. There is, first, the contention of Susanne Langer that an organism wants to sustain itself and to maintain the rhythm of life, and that that is the primary objective of a comic character, such as, one may infer, the mates in these plays depicting mate-versus-mate conflict, especially the women. And these plays, and the characters, minds, and roles of the women in them, bring to mind the noted essay on comedy by George Meredith, the essay in which he maintained that women must be the relative equals of men in a comedy of any consequence; and the women are indeed more than equal to their male counterparts in the plays of Neil Simon that depict mate-versus-mate conflict (especially Hannah Warren and Diana Nichols), although sometimes they might not be equal to the situation in which they find themselves, despite their knowledge of, and wisecracking attitude toward, those situations (especially Karen Nash and Diana Nichols).

Simon's third produced stage comedy, The Odd Couple, depicts, through the archetypal comic characters, Felix Ungar and Oscar Madison, the struggle for power between

friends to maintain their friendship, their autonomy within friendship, and their sanity at the same time, while forced to live together in a mutually intolerable living arrangement. Susanne Langer's notion that the comic character wants to maintain his balance amid the bombardment of the forces that beset it is again applicable to this play, as it is to the other plays by Simon that portray friend-versus-friend conflict -- The Sunshine Boys, The Star-Spangled Girl, "Visitor from Hollywood," which is the second playlet of Plaza Suite, and the fourth, final playlet of California Suite, "Visitors from Chicago."

In The Odd Couple, the cardplaying buddies of Felix and Oscar are less outlandish, less extreme extensions of them; Winnie and Murray are, like Felix, gentle, somewhat browbeaten, and, of course to a lesser degree than Felix, domestically-oriented; and, like Oscar, Speed and Roy are sarcastic, aggressive, and far less sensitive than Felix, Winnie and Murray.

Most apropos to The Sunshine Boys is the theory of "humours" propounded by Ben Jonson, which suggests that a comic character is out of balance and comic because he is dominated by a particular humour -- in the cases of Al Clark and Willie Lewis (the protagonist of The Sunshine Boys), the excessive humour that makes them irascible (and therefore comic) is choleric, one of the four humours cited by Jonson. This theory of humours is not only important in itself, but also as a conduit between the comedy theories that preceded it and the theories that were to follow, as Paul Lauter explains:

Probably the most vital critical contribution of the period (Elizabethan England), Jonson's "humour" theory involved not comedy's ends but its matter. It had always been common practice to use character types in comedy -- they even had acquired names like Miles Gloriosus and Senex. But critics had not provided thorough explanations of why comedy so used these types. Jonson's theory attempts, on the one hand, to show the physiological origins in "humours" of men's general dispositions. On the other hand, he wishes to establish that these dispositions, when they become rigid and disproportionate -- when men are possessed by an excess of one or another humour -- are the source of the ridiculous. The concern of comedy then becomes displaying and anatomizing such humours. In his desire to find physiological explanations of behavior (which Maggi, too, had attempted), in his recognition of the compulsive, mechanical nature of humour-bound characters, and in his implicit belief that comedy should free men from the domination of such ludicrous rigidity, Jonson anticipates the direction of much later criticism, especially in the last half of the nineteenth century.¹

The Star-Spangled Girl is Simon's least favorite play of his own, and the one that was also least successful commercially and critically. Sophie Rauschmeyer, in The Star-Spangled Girl, is an exemplary representative of the comic character as described in the theories of Susanne Langer -- she (Sophie) is a vital organism intent on sustaining the rhythm of life.

"Visitors from Chicago," the fourth, final playlet of California Suite, is an out-and-out farce in the tradition of silent-screen comedy.

¹Paul Lauter, Theories of Comedy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 12.

"Visitor from Hollywood," the second playlet of Plaza Suite, is Simon's most interpersonally political play, making greater use of subtextual manipulation, implication, and intention than any other of his plays.

The next sequence of plays in the Simon panoply details the struggles between a man and his fate (as represented by his environment and the situation in which he finds himself during the play). These three plays -- Last of the Red Hot Lovers, The Prisoner of Second Avenue, and God's Favorite -- present protagonists who are very much like the people in the audience watching them, and who are faced (and sometimes fazed) by "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." While in two of these plays (The Prisoner of Second Avenue and God's Favorite) the protagonist (and his wife and family) is assaulted by many of the multifarious hardships and catastrophes of contemporary human existence, the protagonist of Last of the Red Hot Lovers, Barney Cashman, is resentful of life for neglecting him and giving him a placid and uneventful life. He decides to challenge his fate by having an affair, something he has never done in twenty-three years of marriage; however, after three tries, he is still a virgin at adultery, at the end of Last of the Red Hot Lovers.

The Prisoner of Second Avenue, Simon's black (and blackest) comedy, depicts the total deterioration of the life of a New Yorker, not only personally, but also socially, and even cosmically, in a sequence of catastrophes that mirrors in a contemporary setting the destruction of the "Great Chain of Being" in King Lear. The Prisoner of Second Avenue is so black and ominous a comedy, that it is played as tragedy in Russia, making this play Simon's Le Misanthrope and Cherry Orchard -- a play written to be

played as comedy, but having been considered, and performed, as a tragedy as well.

God's Favorite is of course a contemporary rendering of the story of Job, in which a wealthy manufacturer (Joe Benjamin) undergoes a great variety of pains and trials, but retains his faith in God, and is ultimately spared from any further anguish at play's end.

The final, internal conflict of self-versus-self -- the struggle to discipline, master, and truly know oneself -- dominates Simon's The Gingerbread Lady and Chapter Two. In The Gingerbread Lady, Evy Meara, once a successful pop singer, returns home from a sanitarium which she hopes has provided "the cure" for her alcoholism, and attempts once again to reconstruct her life. She seems to be failing as the play draws to its conclusion, but her daughter, Polly, is there at play's end to help her try once again to win the battle of self.

In Chapter Two, George Schneider learns to give and accept love again after the death of his first wife, and after a nearly disastrous separation, he, with the help of his devoted second wife, Jennie, seems headed for another happy marriage at play's end. In contrast to George Schneider's apparent achievement of self-mastery in Chapter Two, his brother Leo, and Jennie's friend, Faye Medwick, the other characters in the play, seem as defeated in the battle for self at the end of the play as they were at its beginning.

Simon renders all of the above struggles for personal power as contemporary comedy most especially by using the verbal element of drama -- wisecracks, jokes, and structured gags abound in his plays, no matter how grave the

situation, no matter how harried the character. He also undercuts the seriousness and the potentially tragic nature of the situations that some of his characters face by trivializing the nature and extent of those situations. For example, Barney Cashman, the protagonist of Last of the Red Hot Lovers, is a potentially tragic character who does in fact do what many tragic characters do -- he takes his life in his own hands and challenges his apparent fate: placidity. But, rather than opting for something great and grand, he just wants to have an affair, surely as mundane and trivial a goal as a man challenging his very fate might choose. Another example in Simon's dramaturgy of a potentially tragic character trivialized is Mel Edison, a man caught in a tragic situation in The Prisoner of Second Avenue, who does not challenge his fate, but, rather, crumbles before it by way of a contemporary trivialization of catharsis -- the nervous breakdown. Mel Edison does not crumble enough, or achieve sufficient insight, to achieve pathos; instead, he shares a peculiarly contemporary, Simonesque bathos with Barney Cashman, and, one may conjecture, with Simon and his chosen audience as well.

Simon's plots are not funny; in fact, they are very serious for the characters who must enact them, and, upon reflection outside the theater, away from the torrents of laughter that are their building blocks, Simon's plots must be considered serious by anyone who examines them.

Nor are Simon's characters genuinely funny people. Despite the wisecracks, Simon's characters rarely display either a sense of humor or a truly amused, witty attitude towards life; few of his characters are inherently funny; on the

contrary, in fact, it is the seriousness with which his characters assail the oppressive situations in which they find themselves, and their inability, usually, to have a sense of humor about themselves and a sense of objectivity and detachment about their problems, that causes the audience to laugh at their words and actions on the stage.

Fundamentally, Neil Simon creates contemporary comedy from the struggles for personal power of his characters by distancing the genuine struggle and pain of those characters from the audience by the very devices cited above -- wisecracks, jokes, and gag structures, the humorlessness and intensity with which his characters attack their problems, and the trivialization and debasement of potentially genuinely tragic situations and characters.

Indubitably, the plays considered in this study are comedies. Yet, we are still not sure precisely what a comedy is. We began this study with a brief history of theories of comedy in the western world, and with a distinction between the concept of "comedy" as distinguished from that which is "comic." The point was made that no theory of comedy is comprehensive and perfect, that no theory of comedy can account for every comedy. It was also asserted that theories of comedy changed emphasis in the modern era, concentrating on the whole rather than on its parts, as earlier theorists, from Aristotle to the nineteenth century, had done. The following statement by the modern critic Albert Cook epitomizes this change, while, at the same time, showing great irreverence for the earliest and most influential of all historically important comedy theorists (Aristotle), as well as for two of the most important nineteenth-century theorists of the causes of and reasons for laughter (Freud and Bergson):

Comedy is so rich and various that it is trivial to classify it descriptively as Aristotle, Freud and Bergson do. The point is to probe its depths, not to chop it into portions.²

Finally, we are left with the ultimately unanswerable question: What is comedy? Let us respect its integrity, and, as Mr. Cook suggests, let us not dissect it any further, at least in this study. Let us, rather, quote another modern theorist of comedy, James Feibleman, who, at one and the same time, tells us what comedy is and why we can never know what it really is:

Comedy is a unique field of investigation. It is an intrinsic value, and as such comparable only to other intrinsic values. As intrinsic it cannot be explained away or reduced. There are no words to describe logically the intrinsic aspect of any value -- it just is. All that logic can hope to do is to effect an analysis. Such a logical analysis must consist in the tentative segregation of the field itself and the exploratory attempt at definitions. It is this task to which we must address ourselves.³

Yet, although we may never be able to define comedy exactly, we know a comedy when we see one. And, the stage plays of Neil Simon are indeed comedies, comedies that, although written for a very specific audience, nevertheless have universal appeal and relevance, and have achieved universal success and recognition.

²Ibid., p. 475. ³Ibid., p. 461.

APPENDIX:

OBSERVATIONS

We have seen that the stage plays of Neil Simon present and represent the prevailing contemporary struggles for personal power between and within the people of a small segment of modern American society. But the conflicts that Simon delineates mirror only the experience of his target audience (with the modified exception of The Star-Spangled Girl and God's Favorite, his two least successful efforts to date) -- upper and middle middle-class New Yorkers and New York suburbanites. The body of plays considered in this study -- 12 plays written over a period of 18 years (1960-1978) -- does not at all consider the crises, upheavals and changes that affected society as a whole during those eighteen years. While there are interminable references to the trivia, the products, the advertisements, and the petty details of the lives of his target audience (and of Simon's own life of course), substantive social issues are almost wholly ignored. Valium is mentioned (and used) several times in Simon's plays, while Vietnam is mentioned only cursorily, only tangentially, and only once (in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, written in 1968-1969, at the height of the conflict). There are three blacks in all of Simon's dramaturgy, and all as cliché as Aunt Jemima or Uncle Ben: There is the nurse who cares for cantakerous Willie Clark,

ex-Sunshine Boy, after his heart attack, and there are the two servants to Joe Benjamin. The nurse is allowed to exchange ripostes with Willie -- that is the extent of her individuality. But of course everyone exchanges ripostes in the work of Neil Simon. Everyone, that is, except Mady and Morris, the maid and butler in God's Favorite, who are embarrassingly Godfearing, good, colorless (in terms of personality), and very much slaves to Joe Benjamin as Neil Simon has created them in this play. We may well understand that his family must share his trials, but why must Mady and Morris? Why don't they simply leave? Are they nothing more than shadowy extensions of Joe Benjamin? Are they the negatives of God's camera that He will not grace with developing? There is a subtle racism in God's Favorite, just the kind that would lie dormant in the forcedly ignored recesses of the collectively liberal mind of Simon's target audience; it is the belief that when something serious is at stake and on display -- such as the trials of a contemporary Job -- surely he is "white," and if blacks are affected at all by his struggle, it is indirectly and impersonally, for surely a black person would not undergo profound internal struggles of any magnitude, and he certainly would not be an embodiment of Job in this society.

There is only one character specified as having Spanish ancestry in Simon's stage comedies -- a delivery boy in The Gingerbread Lady. There are no third-world ethnicities represented in the works considered in this study; there are no native American Indians, and an exceedingly small number of foreigners -- the loony British Pigeon sisters in The Odd Couple, Diana and Sidney Nichols, also

British, in the third playlet of California Suite, appropriately entitled "Visitors from London," and Victor Velasco, the bohemian of indeterminate ancestry in Barefoot in the Park.

In God's Favorite there is an oblique ethnic slur that is repeated twice! It is the subtle infusion of the word "Polish" into the dialogue for no contextual reason;¹ it is too indirect to be funny, but just noticeable enough to be offensive.

There is one homosexual in all of Simon's stage plays to date; he is Jimmy Perry in The Gingerbread Lady. He is ineffectual, helpless and weak, and, in addition, he is merely a foil and a looking-glass for the play's protagonist, Evy Meara.

Evy Meara is one of a number of excellent women characters that Simon has created. By contrast to other contemporary social issues that he has either neglected or sloughed off, he has indeed rendered the struggles, crises, and personalities of the contemporary woman exceptionally well in such characters as Evy, Karen Nash in the first playlet of Plaza Suite, and Hannah Warren and Diana Nichols in California Suite.

Interestingly, Simon's male characters have a peculiar penchant for considering women as gifts to be given to each other, even if only in a comic vein. Women are mentioned as gifts they want to give to another male character in the play by the protagonists (all males) of

¹Neil Simon, God's Favorite (New York: Samuel French, 1975), pp. 40, 49.

Come Blow Your Horn, The Odd Couple, and The Star-Spangled Girl.²

Certainly, Simon does not claim to be Aristophanes. But not only does he not portray, but he does not even mention in any depth or at any length any major author, artist, philosopher, celebrity, statesman, or politician in the plays under discussion in this study. He does present some fictional petty beaucrats and a general in his staged adaptations of the short stories of Chekov, The Good Doctor, but that is all. Where are Nixon, Agnew, Beckett, Sondheim, Sartre, the Beatles?

In all of Simon's dramaturgy, no one's civil liberties are seriously threatened, and there is no serious (or comic) consideration in any depth of the United States government or of any of its agencies. Simon himself has said the following in this context:

Essentially, I'm not interested in writing about larger, sociological issues; about the war and people coming home with their arms shot off. I leave that to other playwrights. If I'm going to be serious, I prefer to sugarcoat the pill. Probably my most political play is God's Favorite.³

²Neil Simon, Come Blow Your Horn (New York: Samuel French, 1961), p. 35;

Neil Simon, The Odd Couple (New York: Samuel French, 1966), p. 54;

Neil Simon, The Star-Spangled Girl (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1968), p. 13.

³"Playgirl Interview," Playgirl, Feb., 1976, p. 141.

As is often the case, the playwright is the least accurate critic of his own work. God's Favorite is almost wholly apolitical. And, although none of Simon's plays deals with politicians or government, his most politic play is the second playlet of Plaza Suite, "Visitor from Hollywood." (See Chapter V, "Ya Gotta Have Friends," for a discussion of the political nature of this playlet.)

He does not claim to be Molière either, but where is the great instruction, and the ridiculing and purging of the ridiculous and excessive in Simon's work? There is very little, and for good reason. Simon is representing the equivalents of his audience on stage, not their inferiors, as Walter Kerr and other have pointed out; and, in fact, the message of many of his plays is that we cannot be purged of ourselves, of that element that makes us ourselves and makes us comic at the same time. Simon himself feels that his work is indeed morally instructive; he has said the following about it:

Generally, my concern in writing has not been whether or not there is a happy ending on stage, but about saying something to the audience that is morally instructive. If they can learn something from the foibles of the central characters, maybe they won't make the same mistakes themselves. The thing that I hope to put forth in most of my plays is the humor, so that we can use a little of it in our lives.⁴

In his essay, "Images of Impotence," an examination of the works of Simon and Woody Allen, in his book, Astonish Me: Adventures in Contemporary Theatre, John Lahr uses

⁴Ibid., p. 58.

Simon's own words in conversation with him (Lahr) to paint a somewhat different picture of Simon's works, their effect, and their possible intent, perhaps unknown, consciously, to their author (Simon's conversational passages are in quotation marks):

These long-run Broadway successes offer up -- in laughter -- images of impotence . . . This is the theatre of the silent majority.

. . . Neil Simon (offers) images of people who have no 'identity' and no means of controlling experience. They have no unity with their bodies. Although most of them lust for sex and new experiences, they are firmly wedded to the bourgeois life.

They are powerless to change, or at least they have convinced themselves that they are. The situation obsesses Neil Simon, whose plays report what he sees in America's middle-class way of life.

Simon: "I'm terribly conscious of the powerlessness of the people in the plays. But this is basic structural dramatic writing. Character is fate. People have to be destroyed by their own characters; they must not be able to cope with it. Almost every character in my plays knows exactly what his problem is. It's not the case of not knowing who they are. In The Odd Couple, Oscar says to Felix, 'You mean you have no idea of changing.' And Felix says, 'I am what I am.' He knows exactly who he is and cannot change it. When I look around in life, most people who are in trouble know what the problems are. They say, 'There is nothing I can do about it. That's the way I am.' This becomes sadder to people over forty because they feel their characters are determined . . . they're trapped. The trap is themselves, not necessarily life."

But both Simon and his characters forget that a man is evolved by society. Deprived of a strong sense of themselves,

Simon's characters are fighting to stand still. They don't want change because, uncertain of who they are, they are more frightened of what they might become. In the ailing world of these comedies, experience has been quarantined. The characters have no sense of destiny in the world or continuity in history. In a nation where, in 1968, 57 per cent of the electorate voted for either Richard Nixon or George Wallace, Simon's stage separation of character from society chronicles the reactionary impulse which disguises impotence with pragmatism. The plays see a predicament, but, like the characters in them, are not willing to probe the sources or consequences of despair. Simon is conscious of his artistic limitations.

Simon: "I think the society is the result of what my particular character is, magnified many times. . . . When you have to deal with life in general -- the society -- I can't deal with it. I have to get down to the specifics of character. The other thing out there does not interest me. Life in society, class revolution, generation -- I leave it for those who are interested in it . . ."

The impulse of the most successful Broadway comedy writer, then, is not to confront the world but to shore it up. Yet the comic situations betray a sickness which goes beyond human foibles to social madness.

The characters in Broadway comedies are the castrati of capitalism. There is no heroic possibility in their work. . . .

By being true to the bondage of his characters, Neil Simon acknowledges their impotence, but is forced into a theatrical style which, in offering genuine insight into the shallows of society, is also a slavery to them.⁵

⁵John Lahr, Astonish Me: Adventures in Contemporary Theatre (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 121-123, 134-135.

The above quotation is evidence that John Lahr agrees with, and Neil Simon confirms, much of what has been said in this study. I, too, agree, fundamentally, with Lahr's evaluation of Simon's work, as well as with the following criticism of it by Martin Gottfried, who, in turn, reiterates still more of the points I have made in this study.

Gottfried, writing in 1976, in an article entitled, "The Simon Paradox: Jokes or Art," essentially shares Lahr's assessment of Simon's work, but he maintains that Simon is just on the periphery of more profound, more weighty -- more "tragic" -- examinations of contemporary American society:

The tragedy of our middle class is a subject that has been all but ignored by the American theater. It is nothing less than the failure of the American dream, the sacrifice of so many lives to the work and family ethic, with its reward of home, car and frustration.

This sacrifice is illustrated by nearly every one of Simon's plays. Though their homogenized world of middle-class materialism is probably what makes them so popular with audiences who identify with it, Simon invariably makes the world an unhappy one. His characters are well-off, living in brownstones or high-rises, but they have problems and not insignificant ones. Their problems are the payoff for institutional repression, the stifled scream, Thoreau's quiet desperation.

The every day life in a Simon play is one of growing up (Come Blow Your Horn), getting married (Barefoot in the Park) and divorced (The Odd Couple), sexual attraction (The Star-Spangled Girl), marital crisis (Plaza Suite), middle age and sexual frustration (Last of the Red Hot Lovers), and work problems (The Prisoner of Second Avenue). That last isn't merely a joke title, for

Simon seems all too aware of the prison that middle-class achievement can become, particularly for his most familiar figure: the child-man who cannot cry because husbands and fathers aren't supposed to; because you aren't supposed to cry when you've done everything the right way and have the furniture to prove it. . . .

Simon believes that the good life delivered by these middle-class working stiff is necessary if purposeful civilization is to continue. His plays believe in that as much as they believe in the personal emptiness and deprivation these providers suffer for their pains. So he cannot damn the load of that responsibility, though his plays rush to such a conclusion.

Simon's funny tragic heroes, then, protect middle-class values at the cost of lifelong emotional constipation. They will not abandon their responsibilities, cannot. The playwright is sensitive to the inhumanity of this dilemma and the psychic agony it inflicts and expresses that in the humor of frustration; but seeing no solution he can only reach out to its victims with compassion for their lives' misfortune.

In doing so he has within his grasp the stuff of tragedy. . . .

For there is a tragedy, and not an exclusively American one, in the pie-in-the-sky middle class dream and Death of a Salesman was but an introduction to it. . . .

Granted, this is going much further than the reality of Simon's plays. Still, the potential is there because the basis is. If he could only leap into what he has tip-toed regularly about, and even dipped into from time to time, he might come up not only with his funniest and most telling work, but, in the bargain, the high theater to which he aspires. For he is halfway there already. Simon is never funnier than when honest and true for us all.⁶

⁶Martin Gottfried, "The Neil Simon Paradox," New York Post, June 19, 1976, p. 44.

Simon himself agrees with Gottfried about the relative failure of the American dream for most Americans:

No one has been able to get to the core of why Americans are unhappy. I guess that the expectations of the American Dream are so high that either they are never fulfilled or, if they are fulfilled, we say, "Is that all there is?" . . . There's no doubt that this is a success-oriented country, and that with that comes an awful lot of unhappiness.⁷

Simon questions some of the institutions, procedures, and beliefs of his society, but he challenges none, and he proposes no solutions, as Aristophanes does in Lysistrata, for example, nor does he present any truly dangerous comic eccentrics, like Tartuffe.

Simon makes extensive use of what is without a doubt the foremost prop used in contemporary drama (radio, film, and television included) for the purpose of furthering the plot: the telephone. A telephone is used in every single play considered in this study. At some point in each of these twelve plays (not including The Good Doctor, of course), a character talks via the telephone. While it is used in all of the plays, the telephone is absolutely essential to some of them; consider the following list:

1) In Simon's first play, Come Blow Your Horn, the actress playing the Mother has a comic set piece based upon trying to take messages over the telephone;

2) His second play, Barefoot in the Park, begins with an exchange between Corie Bratter and the man who has

⁷"Playgirl Interview," p. 58.

come to her new apartment to install the telephone; and the Telephone Man makes another appearance later in the play;

3) In The Odd Couple, his third play, the telephone is used on six different occasions, and referred to at length several other times as well;

4) In The Star-Spangled Girl, the telephone is practically a fourth character in the play, being used extensively to keep Andy and Norman in touch with the outside world with which they'd rather not be in touch;

5) Last of the Red Hot Lovers ends with Barney inviting his wife to his mother's apartment via the telephone;

6) The first overtures of courtship between George Schneider and Jennie Malone in Chapter Two, as well as the beginning of their chance acquaintanceship, and the harmonious romantic finale between them, take place on the phone; in the course of the play they talk to each other by phone almost as much as they do in person.

The importance of the telephone as a plot-furthering device in the dramaturgy of Neil Simon cannot be overestimated.

Among the devices of dramaturgy peculiar to his own work that Simon uses in his plays as he uses the physical prop the telephone, are the romantic appeal of the smell of one's beloved (see Barefoot in the Park and The Star-Spangled Girl⁸), and the various offensive and aggressive manifestations of "spitting and poking" (see Come Blow Your Horn, The

⁸Neil Simon, Barefoot in the Park (New York: Samuel French, 1964), p. 28;

Simon, The Star-Spangled Girl, p. 13.

Gingerbread Lady, and The Sunshine Boys⁹).

The conflicts, the struggles, and the crises in the lives of the characters depicted by Neil Simon are genuine, profound, and important, to them and to Simon's target audience. Although Simon may not talk of social upheavals and political rebellions, he does chronicle personal and family crises that register most directly and forcefully with the people for whom he is writing. The range of contemporary personal and family problems that he details is almost comprehensive, and is certainly representative of the internal and intrafamily conflicts of his target audience:

1) In Come Blow Your Horn, he presents, albeit in a light vein, the permanent, inevitable alteration of an established family structure;

2) In Barefoot in the Park he chronicles the difficulties inherent in learning to live with others and establishing a family structure;

3) In The Odd Couple, in California Suite, and in Chapter Two, divorce is the springboard for the actions of some of the characters;

4) The bittersweet life and uncertain domestic future of Karen Nash haunt us in the first playlet of Plaza Suite; her husband, Sam's, tragically impossible desire to "want to do it all over again," haunts us as well;

⁹Simon, Come Blow Your Horn, p. 57;

Neil Simon, The Gingerbread Lady (New York: Samuel French, 1971), p. 71;

Neil Simon, The Sunshine Boys (New York: Samuel French, 1973), p. 57.

5) Last of the Red Hot Lovers chronicles the unfulfilled, routine, and almost anonymous and invisible life of Barney Cashman, the empty, promiscuous life of Elaine Navazio, the masochistic, promiscuous life of Bobbi Michele, and the profoundly depressed existence of Jeanette Fisher;

6) Evy Meara's recurrent alcoholism, sexual frustration, and loneliness, and the weakness and slow, torturous self-destruction of Evy and of her friends, Toby Landau and Jimmy Perry, are the substance of The Gingerbread Lady;

7) A complete cornucopia of calamities, loss of job, and the oxymoron of justifiable paranoia and the inevitable result of a nervous breakdown are the rewards of Mel and Edna Edison in The Prisoner of Second Avenue for a life lived humbly, honestly, and within all the laws;

8) Incipient senility and downright orneriness are the stock-in-trade of the retired "Sunshine Boys;"

9) Joe Benjamin and his family suffer a painful test of faith in God's Favorite;

10) The first playlet of California Suite, "Visitor from New York," suggests the disoriented life of a child whose parents have been divorced for nine years; the third playlet of California Suite, "Visitors from London," treats of the bittersweet and singularly imperfect marriage of Diana and Sidney Nichols;

11) George Schneider must overcome the death of his beloved first wife in Chapter Two, and then face, with Jennie Malone, at a much later stage in life, the same establishing of a family structure that Corie and Paul Bratter undertake in Barefoot in the Park; and George's brother, Leo and Jennie's friend, Faye, live lives that are, for the most part, empty, unfulfilled, and without significant potential for change;

12) Adultery is mentioned, suggested, or consummated in the first and second playlets of Plaza Suite, in Last of the Red Hot Lovers, in The Gingerbread Lady, in the second and third playlets of California Suite (in the third playlet it is homosexual adultery), and in Chapter Two.

It is instructive to note that Simon's comedies do not always have "happy endings." An astonishingly large number of his characters does not, in fact, achieve its objectives in his plays, and an equally large number is left singularly unhappy at play's end. The following is a list of the characters in the stage comedies of Neil Simon who face less-than-happy endings in his plays:

1) Karen and Sam Nash in "Visitor from Mamaroneck," the first playlet of Plaza Suite;

2) Barney Cashman, Elaine Navazio, Bobbi Michele, and Jeanette Fisher -- all of the characters -- in Last of the Red Hot Lovers;

3) Evy Meara, Toby Landau, and Jimmy Perry in The Gingerbread Lady;

4) Mel and Edna Edison in The Prisoner of Second Avenue;

5) Willie Lewis and Al Clark in The Sunshine Boys;

6) Hannah Warren in "Visitor from New York," Marvin and Millie Michaels in "Visitor from Philadelphia," Diana and Sidney Nichols in "Visitors from London," and Mort and Beth Hollender and Stu and Gert Franklyn in "Visitors from Chicago," -- all of the characters (except the unconscious prostitute in "Visitor from Philadelphia") -- in California Suite;

7) Leo Schneider and Faye Medwick in Chapter Two.

Thus we have the list of oppressions plaguing the characters (and audiences) of Neil Simon, a list with which any contemporary psychiatrist is all-too-familiar: adultery, divorce, alcoholism, guilt, loss of job, the catastrophic effect of the death of a loved one, etc. The road to laughter is paved with many a painful stone and bordered by many a prickly thorn. Simon's characters share the pain of his audience; his characters make wisecracks in order that they -- and his audience -- may continue to bear their multifarious burdens. Laughter masks the crying, and, more frighteningly, the silence within. Simon has in fact remained true to his philosophy of life in his dramaturgy: in the stage plays of Neil Simon life is indeed the villain.

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