



# WALNUT STREET THEATRE

## Laughter

## On The 23rd Floor



# Study Guide

## GETTING TO KNOW THE AUTHOR: Neil Simon

Neil Simon was born on July 4, 1927 in New York City. He started in show business as a comedy writer, collaborating with talents like Woody Allen and Mel Brooks. Simon began writing plays in the 1960s—the first in a long list including *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple*, as well as the autobiographical *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. He is also an accomplished screenwriter and the winner of a Pulitzer Prize for his 1991 play *Lost in Yonkers*.

### EARLY LIFE

Marvin Neil Simon was born on July 4, 1927 in the Bronx. (Some sources state he was born in Manhattan.) He grew up in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, where he lived with his parents and his brother Danny. His parents had a tumultuous marriage. Simon took refuge in the movies during his childhood years, finding particular solace and delight in comedies. He attended college at New York University and the University of Denver, also serving in the Army Air Force Reserve.

### WRITING FOR RADIO AND TV

Simon took a job in the Warner Brothers Manhattan office mailroom in the 1950s. After several years in this position, he quit Warner Brothers to begin writing with his brother, Danny Simon, on a full-time basis. The brothers wrote radio and television scripts for shows including the Sid Caesar series *Your Show of Shows*. The writing staff of this series included Mel Brooks, Woody Allen and Carl Reiner.

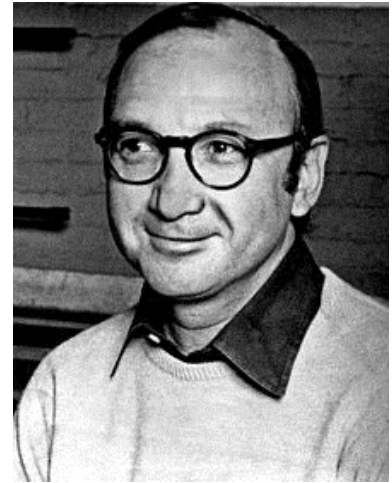
By the 1960s, Simon had begun to concentrate on writing plays for Broadway. His first major hit came in 1961 with *Come Blow Your Horn*, followed by the romance *Barefoot in the Park* in 1963. His next show, 1965's *The Odd Couple*, earned Simon his first Tony Award. *The Odd Couple* was adapted into a successful movie and then a television comedy series starring Jack Klugman and Tony Randall.

### MAJOR SUCCESSES ON BROADWAY

Simon's string of Broadway successes included four plays running simultaneously in 1966 through the next year. He has also earned a record number of Tony nominations over the course of his prolific career. Despite his popularity and success, Simon has at times experienced less-than-stellar reviews from critics who consider his work sentimental and mainstream.

Simon has drawn extensively on his own life and upbringing in his theatrical writing. Many of his works—including *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983) and *Broadway Bound* (1986)—take place in working-class neighborhoods of New York City. He won both a Tony and the Pulitzer Prize for his 1991 play set in New York, *Lost in Yonkers*.

In addition to plays, Simon has written the books for musicals such as *The Goodbye Girl*; he has also adapted some of his plays to the screen and written original screenplays, including 1976's *Murder by Death*. As of 2014, Simon has earned four Academy Award nominations for his screenwriting and four Emmy nominations as well.

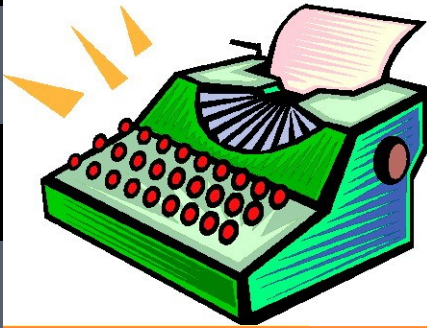


### PERSONAL LIFE

Simon has been married five times—to four women—and has three children. His 1977 play, *Chapter Two*, draws on his personal experience as a man who remarries following the death of his wife.

In 1983, the Shubert Organization renamed a 1920s-era theater in midtown Manhattan, dubbing it the Neil Simon Theatre. Simon also holds honorary degrees from Hofstra University and Williams College, among other accolades.

From: <http://www.biography.com/people/neil-simon-9484352#synopsis>



## SHOW SYNOPSIS

Inspired by Simon's early career experience as a junior writer (along with his brother Danny) for *Your Show of Shows*, the play focuses on Sid Caesar-like Max Prince, the star of a weekly comedy-variety show circa 1953, and his staff, including Simon's alter-ego Lucas Brickman, who maintains a running commentary on the writing, fighting, and wacky antics which take place in the writers' room. Max has an ongoing battle with NBC executives, who fear his humor is too sophisticated for Middle America.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### BEFORE THE SHOW

- Has anyone ever been to a live play before? How was it different from television or a movie?
- What is the difference between a play and a musical?
- What is the difference between a drama and a comedy?
- Do you know of any famous comedians? Who?
- What are some reasons that people write comedies or comedic pieces?

### AFTER THE SHOW

- Did you enjoy this performance? What was your favorite part?
- Who was your favorite character? Why?
- Did the show make you laugh? What part of the play did you think was the funniest?
- What references did you pick up on during the performance?
- How did each character in the show make themselves unique? What did the actors do that set them apart from one another?



## THEATRE 101



### Ever wondered how to put on a play?

There are many different elements that go into putting a show up on its feet. Please review the following with your students:

**PLAYWRIGHT** The playwright writes the script.

**DIRECTOR** The director is in charge of orchestrating the entirety of the production. They lead the actors, designers, and production crew to put the show on its feet.

**COSTUME** What the actors wear during the show.

**SCENERY** Everything on stage (*except props*) used to represent the place at which action is occurring.

**PROPS** All physical items on stage with the exception of the scenery. This includes lamps, chairs, pens, paper, books, and more!

**LIGHTS** Stage lights illuminate the actors so that they look their best. The colors used, focus of the light, and amount of lighting can really set the mood and environment of a scene.

**SOUND** Everything that you hear during a performance that does not come from the actors.

**ACTORS** The actors are the people that perform the show onstage.

**AUDIENCE** The lucky people that get to watch the show. New to being an audience member? Follow these rules and you will be a natural!

### AUDIENCE RULES

- ◆ Unlike a movie, the actors are performing in front of you. They can see everything that you do. Talking, sleeping, poking your neighbor, or making noise during the performance distracts the actors and others around you.
- ◆ Don't bring electronics to the performance. The use of cell phones, cameras, computers, tablets, and video game devices are **not allowed**.
- ◆ Use your better judgment on when to laugh, clap, and/or cry during the performance. But don't forget to clap at the end of the show!
- ◆ Stay in your seat during the performance.
- ◆ Make sure you go to the bathroom *before* the show starts.

## WARM-UP: "HONEY WON'T YOU SMILE FOR ME?"

Laughter On The 23rd Floor is a show that thrives on one essential element: LAUGHTER! In this exercise, your students will practice in the art of making people laugh.

### DIRECTIONS:

- Arrange students into a circle, with one person in the middle.
- The person in the middle will rotate around the circle, attempting to make each student on the outside laugh.
- Using just their voice and physicality, and without touching the students in the circle, the person in the middle will say "Honey, won't you smile for me?" while attempting to make them laugh.
- The person on the outside should respond by saying, "No honey, I just can't smile."
- The game continues until the person in the middle makes someone laugh, then that person take their place in the middle.



## TRY IT YOURSELF!

### DIRECTIONS

Give students a chance to act out a scene from *Laughter On The 23rd Floor*. Before jumping into the performance, think about all of the elements that go into a play. Are there any props that we can use to help improve the scene? Where are the characters when this scene is taking place? What might the scenery look like?

## SAMPLE SCENE FROM "LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR"

**MAX:** ...Is Napoleon dead?

**VAL:** What do you mean?

**MAX:** I asked a simple question. Is Napoleon dead?

**VAL:** Yes, Max. He is. Napoleon is dead.

**MAX:** How do you know? Did you see him dead?

**VAL:** Not personally, no. But I saw his tomb in Paris.

**MAX:** Did you open the tomb and look?

**VAL:** They don't let you do that, Max. And who could lift it? It was just me and my wife.

**MAX:** They built the Eiffel Tower, they didn't put Mr. Eiffel in it.

**KENNY:** Mr. Kellogg isn't in his box of corn flakes either, Max. What point are you trying to make?

**MAX:** I just made it. Maybe we can fire a writer, but no one has to go.

**BRIAN:** How do we do that, Max?

**MAX:** Easy. I worked it all out. I cut all your salaries down ten percent. Then I fire a writer. Doesn't make any difference who. Then I take all the ten percents and I pay the fired writer. So he stays. And then I pay your ten percents back out of miscellaneous expenses. So the I.R.S. gets paid, all the writers get paid, no one gets fired and it doesn't cost me anything.

**KENNY:** And when they ask where the miscellaneous expenses are, what do you say?

**MAX:** They're in Napoleon's tomb!

## "THAT'S FUNNY"

### COMEDY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

FROM: **The New York Times**



### KEY QUESTIONS:

1. What purposes does comedy serve?
2. What makes something funny? What makes attempts at humor fail? Why are these things often hard to articulate?
3. Are there any forms of comedy that are virtually universal? How much is dependent on context? Why are some things considered funny in one culture – or for one gender – but not funny in or for another?
4. Should any topics be off limits in comedy? Why or why not?
5. Compared with serious drama, what challenges are there in creating and performing comedy?
6. What does the popularity of “fake” or satirical news sources say about American society and culture?

### STUDENT ACTIVITY: THIS JUST IN

Students can write and perform a “fake news” broadcast, in the vein of “The Daily Show” or the “Saturday Night Live” Weekend Update segment, either about current news events, as if from another point in history (a “Daily Show” set in the Middle Ages?) or entirely about news in the world of comedy. Their “reports” should reflect their knowledge and understanding of both the genre of news satire and the people and topics in the news items.



### STUDENT ACTIVITY: COMEDIC LIFE AND TIMES



What time periods and places have been fertile ground for comedy? Who has broken ground in the field, confounded expectations and stereotypes or overcome personal adversity? Students research the lives of famous comedians who hail from a notable time period, location or background and give presentations to the class in the “role” of the comedian they studied.

From: [http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/thats-funny-comedy-across-the-curriculum/?\\_r=0](http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/15/thats-funny-comedy-across-the-curriculum/?_r=0)



# WALNUT STREET THEATRE

## BIOGRAPHY



Walnut Street Theatre has the unique distinction of being the oldest, continuously operating theatre in the English-speaking world, having served Philadelphia audiences for over 200 years!

Today, under the direction of Producing Artistic Director Bernard Havard, Walnut Street Theatre is in its 34th season as a self-producing, non-profit theatre company. Walnut Street Theatre continues to entertain and enlighten diverse audiences with high quality theatrical programming. With more than 50,000 subscribers, the Walnut is also the most subscribed theatre company in the world!

Last season, **172,000** children and adults were impacted by the Walnut's Education Programs: including our theatre school with classes for kids and adults, Camp Walnut, Our Touring Outreach Program to local schools and our artist in residency programs.

### WALNUT STREET THEATRE EDUCATION STAFF

<b>DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION</b>	Thomas Quinn
<b>ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION</b>	Ashley Kerns
<b>EDUCATION PROGRAMS ASSOCIATE</b>	Patrick Shane
<b>EDUCATION PRODUCTION ASSOCIATE</b>	Angie Confredo
<b>RESIDENT TEACHING ARTIST</b>	Jasmine Hammond
<b>EDUCATION APPRENTICE</b>	Amanda Pasquini
<b>ACTING APPRENTICES</b>	Anne Bragg
	Alexa Cepeda
	Dana Orange
	Austin Turner

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

#### WEB

- Walnut Street Theatre Touring Outreach Company  
<https://walnutstreettheatre.org/education/outreach.php>
- Creative Drama Lesson Plans  
<http://www.childdrama.com/lessons.html>
- Drama Games  
<http://dramaresource.com/drama-games/>

### SPONSORED BY



### LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR

*Creative Team*

<b>DIRECTOR</b>	Frank Ferrante
<b>PLAYWRIGHT</b>	Neil Simon

### MEDIA PARTNERS

