

College Theatre

Presents

Plaza Suite

By Neil Simon

Directed by Michael Ryczek

Characters

Act One: Visitors from Mamaroneck:

Bellhop
Karen Nash
Sam Nash
Waiter
Jean MacCormack

Act Two: Visitor from Hollywood

Waiter
Jesse Kiplinger
Muriel Tate

Act Three: Visitor from Forest Hills

Norma Hubley
Roy Hubley
Borden Eisler
Mimsey Hubley

Setting

All three acts take place in 1968 in the same suite of New York's Plaza Hotel.

Synopsis

Plaza Suite is composed of three one-act plays, all set in the same suite of New York's Plaza Hotel in 1968. More than any other dwelling place, the hotel serves effectively as an image of transience – of people who come and go, of casual intimacy, of impermanent human attachments. Not only do the plays have a common setting, but they are also united by common themes: marital conflict, infidelity, lack of communication and fear of aging. Although each of the plays is humorous, Simon views the first piece as drama, the second as comedy and the third as farce.

Visitor from Mamaroneck – Mamaroneck is that suburban town in Westchester County often used synonymously as a seat of conventionality. Sam has achieved the American dream: prosperity, marriage and a family. Karen is a conventional 1950s-style wife, a homemaker whose entire focus during her 23 years of marriage has been on her husband and her two children. However, neither Sam nor Karen is particularly happy. Sam fears aging and is having a classic mid-life crisis affair. Karen who is more concerned about the state of her marriage, is distressed to learn of the affair, but is desperate to preserve her 1950s style marriage. Homemaker and wife seem to be her only real sense of identity.

Visitor from Hollywood – A prominent Hollywood producer attempts to seduce his former high school girlfriend, whom he has not seen for the past 17 years. The real subject here seems to be empty fantasies – and the banality of loveless relationships. Both characters are not quite what they appear to be. Muriel is unhappily married and has a drinking problem. Jesse discloses that success in Hollywood has failed to bring him happiness and that he is less self-assured than his glamorous appearance would suggest. Robert Johnson has noted “the play focuses not on the act of seduction, but on the motivations of the seducer and the seduced.” Muriel’s reason for pursuing Jesse is that she is bored with her life and star-struck by a Hollywood celebrity. Jesse’s reason for wanting Muriel is that he actually dreams of escaping from Hollywood and returning to innocent days of his youth. They have each overly romanticized each other’s image.

Visitor from Forest Hills – like most farces, this play presents a broadly humorous situation, relying chiefly on physical humor and exaggeration for its comic effect. Farce usually begins with a minor problem, which is compounded by a series of more complicated problems until calamity seems to threaten the characters. Norma and Roy’s daughter Mimsey has locked herself in the bathroom minutes before her wedding. Rather than making an effort to understand why, Norma and Roy are focused on their own concerns. Norma is fearful of the embarrassment of a canceled wedding and Roy is worried about the financial losses he will suffer. There is much bickering and casting blame on each other.

“Understanding Neil Simon” by Susan Koprince

Director’s Note

“With Neil Simon, don’t try to be funny, just tell the truth.”
- Maureen Stapleton

Neil Simon generally works in the vein of domestic realism, specifically focused on the difficulty of maintaining long term relationships. He blends humor and pathos, and has been accused of an over reliance on gags and one liners. Simon’s plays invariably depict the plight of white middle-class Americans, most of whom are New Yorkers and many of whom are Jewish. John Lahr has suggested that Simon’s theatre is aimed at the “silent majority” – those people who have a romantic craving for sex, adventure, and new experience but who are helpless to change, wedded as they are to the bourgeois life.

Simon characters are often frustrated, edgy and insecure, the prospect of aging frightens them, and they constantly struggle to find a sense of belonging. Female characters are often presented in traditional roles of wives and mothers. Most of his female characters seem to find it difficult to live without a man. Simon seems to believe strongly in the traditional institution of marriage – the ultimate symbol of social harmony – and in the importance of the family unit.

Simon acknowledges that his Jewish background is “so deeply embedded in me and so inherent in me that I am unaware of its quality.” A common element of Jewish humor is that it fuses sentiment with irony and self-satire with earthiness. Traditional Jewish humor is also self-deprecating, with the oppressed Jews making themselves the butt of the joke. The ultimate goal of such self-deprecating humor is to transcend one’s status as victim – to prevail, to flourish. The ultimate goal is to use humor as a healing, life-giving force. Simon recognizes that the figure of the suffering, self-doubting Jew is a “20th Century symbol for Everyman – alienation and assimilation, allegedly Jewish diseases, belong to all, just as the humor that emanates from the tensions is universal.” As he has stated, “Oppressed people tend to be witty.”

Simon is often drawn to open endings, in which the problems of the characters are not completely resolved, an ending which may even be tinged by sadness. “My view is how sad and funny life is. What is a sad situation and how can I tell it humorously?” This Chekhovian mixture of humor and poignancy – of laughter and tears – is a hallmark of Simon’s comedy. Simon also suggests that by focusing on the painful aspects of the human experience, we can ultimately transcend the pain, arriving at a sense of connection, a feeling of shared humanity.

M.R.

About the Author

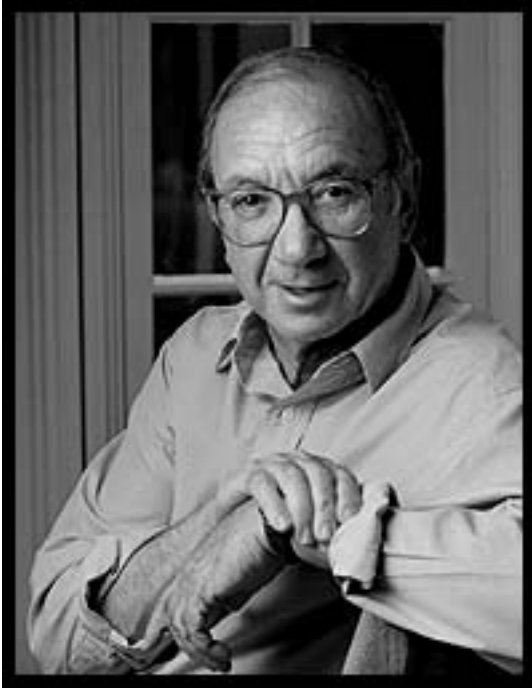


Photo from washingtonpost.com

Simon was born in The Bronx, New York City to Mamie and Irving Simon, a garment salesman. He briefly attended New York University from 1944 to 1945 and the University of Denver from 1945 to 1946. Two years later, he quit his job as a mailroom clerk in the Warner Brothers offices in Manhattan to write radio and television scripts with his brother Danny Simon, including a tutelage under radio humourist Goodman Ace when Ace ran a short-lived writing workshop for CBS. Their revues for Camp Tamiment in Pennsylvania in the early 1950s caught the attention of Sid Caesar, who hired the duo for his popular TV comedy series *Your Show of Shows*. Simon later incorporated their experiences into his play *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. His work won him two Emmy Award nominations and the appreciation of Phil Silvers, who hired him to write for *Sergeant Bilko* in 1959.

In 1961, Simon's first Broadway play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, opened at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre, where it ran for 678 performances. Six weeks after its closing, his second production, the musical *Little Me* opened to mixed reviews. Although it failed to attract a large audience, it earned Simon his first Tony Award nomination. Overall, he has garnered seventeen Tony nominations and won three. He also won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Lost in Yonkers*.

In 1966 Simon had four shows running on Broadway at the same time: *Sweet Charity*, *The Star-Spangled Girl*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Barefoot in the Park*. His professional association with producer Emanuel Azenberg began with *The Sunshine Boys* in 1972 and continued with *The Good Doctor*, *God's Favorite*, *Chapter Two*, *They're Playing Our*

Song, I Ought to Be in Pictures, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Biloxi Blues, Broadway Bound, Jake's Women, The Goodbye Girl, Laughter on the 23rd Floor, among others.

Simon also has written screenplays for more than twenty films. These include adaptations of his own plays and original work too, including *The Out-of-Towners, Murder by Death* and *The Goodbye Girl*. He has received four Best Screenplay Academy Award nominations.

Simon has been conferred with two *honoris causa* degrees; a Doctor of Humane Letters from Hofstra University and a Doctor of Laws from Williams College. He is the namesake of the legitimate Broadway theater the Neil Simon Theatre, formerly the Alvin Theatre, and an honorary member of the Walnut Street Theatre's board of trustees.

Simon has been married five times, to dancer Joan Baim (1953-1973), actress Marsha Mason (1973-1981), twice to Diane Lander (1987-1988 and 1990-1998), and currently actress Elaine Joyce. He is the father of Nancy and Ellen, from his first marriage, and Bryn, Lander's daughter from a previous relationship whom he adopted.

- www.neilsimonplays.com

About the Plaza Hotel



Photo: www.gonycity.com

The Plaza is the second hotel of that name on the site. The French Renaissance château-style building was designed by Henry Janeway Hardenbergh and opened to the public on October 1, 1907. At the time, it cost \$12.5 million to construct. When it opened, a room at the Plaza Hotel was only \$2.50. Today, the same room costs \$3,750.

The Plaza was accorded landmark status by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1988 and is, with the Waldorf-Astoria, the only New York City hotel to be designated as a National Historic Landmark. In the 1950s it was the setting for Kay Thompson's series of *Eloise* books, Eartha Kitt and Peggy Lee played the Persian Room, unaccompanied ladies were not permitted in the Oak Room bar and the Palm Court was favored for luncheons and teas.

The Beatles stayed at the Plaza during their first visit to the United States in February, 1964.

On November 28, 1966, in honor of publisher Katharine Graham, Truman Capote hosted his acclaimed "Black & White Ball" in the Grand Ballroom.

In September 1985, the Plaza Accord was signed at the Plaza. The Accord served as an agreement among the finance ministers of the United States, Japan, West Germany, France and Britain to bring down the price of the U.S. dollar against their currencies.

The building was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1978. Tours are offered to the public.



The Plaza seen across The Pond in Central Park

Photo: www.gonycity.com



The Plaza Hotel turned 100 years old in 2007, celebrating with ceremonies and fireworks.

Photo: www.gonycity.com

Conrad Hilton bought the Plaza for \$7.4 million in 1943 and spent \$6.0 million refurbishing it. The Childs Company - a national restaurant chain which partnered in the development of the neighboring Savoy-Plaza Hotel, now the site of the General Motors Building - purchased the Plaza Hotel in 1955 for 1,100,000 shares of Childs common stock, valued at approximately \$6,325,000. Childs subsequently changed its name to Hotel Corporation of America, now known as Sonesta International Hotels Corporation. Donald Trump bought the Plaza for \$407.5 million in 1988. Trump commented on his purchase in a full-page open letter he had published in *The New York Times*:

"I haven't purchased a building, I have purchased a masterpiece — the Mona Lisa. For the first time in my life, I have knowingly made a deal that was not economic — for I can never justify the price I paid, no matter how successful the Plaza becomes."

It was sold in 2004 for \$675 million to a Manhattan developer, El Ad Properties. El Ad bought the hotel with plans of adding residential and commercial sections. Since The Plaza Hotel is a New York landmark, Tishman Construction Corporation, the construction management company hired to complete the renovations and conversions, had to comply with landmark regulations.

Today the Plaza offers 282 hotel rooms and 152 private condo hotel units and is managed by Fairmont Hotels and Resorts. Diamond retailer Lev Leviev put in the first bid for a Plaza apartment at \$10 million. In May 2007, a new apartment in the Plaza was sold for a record \$50 million.

The Plaza Hotel offers its guests and residences many services including a butler on every floor, baby-sitting and concierges, a gymnasium managed by the world renowned

trainer Radu, a shopping mall, the Palm Court under the restored stained glass ceiling, the Champagne Bar located in the hotel lobby with views of Grand Army Square, the Edwardian Room, the Terrace Room, the Oak Room Restaurant and Bar, the Rose Club, the Grand Ball Room, as well as meeting rooms and conference rooms. The Grand Ballroom, Terrace Room and meeting spaces are currently managed by CPS Events, a joint venture between Delaware North Companies and the High end caterer Great Performances.

Although the hotel had appeared briefly in earlier films, it made its major movie debut in the 1959 film *North by Northwest*. It was also a setting for *Barefoot in the Park* (1967), *Funny Girl* (1968), *Plaza Suite* (1971), *The Way We Were* (1973), *Love at First Bite* (1979), *Arthur* (1981), *Brewster's Millions* (1985), *Big Business* (1988), *King of New York* (1990), *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *It Could Happen to You* (1994), *Almost Famous* (2000), and *Inside the Osmonds* (2001), and several episodes of *The Sopranos* (most notably *The Test Dream*, Season 5, Episode 11) feature scenes occurring in a suite at the Plaza. The recent *Bride Wars* (2008) with Kate Hudson, and Anne Hathaway was shot in the Grand ballroom, the Terrace room, and in corridors and the Palm Court. The film also shows the lobby and exterior. The Plaza is also mentioned and shown in chic shows including *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City*.

- www.wickapedia.com

1968 Events

- January 20 - Game of the Century in college basketball between the University of Houston Cougars and the UCLA Bruins played at the Houston Astrodome. It was the first prime-time national broadcast of a college basketball game and paved the way for the CBS March Madness television coverage.
- January 27 – The Lennon Sisters make their final appearance on *The Lawrence Welk Show*.
- April 4 – James Brown appears on national television, in an attempt to calm feelings of anger in the United States following the assassination of Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.
- April 6 - The Eurovision Song Contest 1968 is held at the Royal Albert Hall in London. It's the first ESC to be televised in color.
- April 2 - British singer Petula Clark appears on a US television special on NBC with Harry Belafonte as a guest. An innocent, affectionate gesture between the two during a song (Clark touched Belafonte on the arm) prompts concern from the show's sponsor due to the difference in their races, but the scene is aired intact at Clark's insistence. The special airs to high ratings and marks the first time two different races share friendly bodily contact on American television.
- May 4 - Mary Hopkin performs on the British TV show *Opportunity Knocks*. Hopkin catches the attention of model Twiggy, who recommends her to Beatle Paul McCartney. McCartney soon signs Hopkin to Apple Records.

- October 14 - First live network transmission of video from inside a manned US space capsule in orbit ("Apollo 7"). There were six such broadcasts during their eleven-day mission.
- October 21-25 - Joan Crawford makes a guest appearance for five episodes on the soap opera *The Secret Storm*, filling in for her ailing daughter, Christina. However, Joan slurs her lines and is obviously intoxicated during the tapings.
- November 17 - NBC breaks away from a pro football game to air a TV movie adaptation of *Heidi*, sparking furious protest.
- November 22 - William Shatner and Nichelle Nichols share the first interracial kiss on US television in the *Star Trek* episode "Plato's Stepchildren"
- December 3 - Elvis Presley's '68 Comeback Special airs on NBC, followed by a Brigitte Bardot special.
- December 24 - Apollo 8 broadcasts to the Earth the message that there is a Santa Claus and later reads from Genesis.
- Nearly 200 million households now own television sets, 78 million of which are in the US.

-www.wickapedia.com

Bibliography

Funk and Wagnalls New Encyclopedia. First Search: World Almanac. College of DuPage Library, IL 24 September 2007.

Rewrites, by Neil Simon. Simon and Schuster, 1996

<http://cgi.org>

<http://wickapedia.com>

<http://dictionary.com>

<http://encycloppedia.farlex.com>

<http://theneilsimonplays.com>

www.washingtonpost.com

www.gonycity.com

Understanding Neil Simon by Susan Koprince, University of South Carolina Press 1990

Things to think about prior to performance:

- What expectations do you have about seeing a Neil Simon play?
- What is your initial impression, when you walk into the Theatre? What do you anticipate your experience will be within this space?
- What is your reaction to the time period (1968)?

Things to watch for in performance:

- What is your perception of the setting?
- What do you notice about the costumes? How do the costumes help convey the play's time period? What do they say about the characters?
- How does the experience of seeing three one act plays differ from seeing a full length play?
- What themes exist in all three acts?
- What is the effect of the music in this production? How does it augment your perception and how does it underline certain moments?

Things to think about after the performance:

- Which of the three stories appealed to you the most? Why?
- How have women changed since this play was first produced in 1968?
- What was the effect of the set? How did it affect you?
- What is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for his work?
- What do the final moments say about the overall play? Why does Simon leave us with images of a wedding?

*The running time for this production is approximately 2 hours with one intermission.

Please note late seating will not take place after the first ten minutes of the performance. Late comers will be seated in the back of the theatre.

Please join us for a **pre-show discussion on Thursday, November 12th, 6:45 – 7:15 pm in room AC139** preceding the preview performance. Note that pre-show discussions will include the director and designers, and will be a discussion of the approach to this production.

There will be a **post-show discussion following the Friday, November 20th** performance. The post-show will be with director, cast and crew, and will be fielding questions from the audience.