

Obituaries

Neil Simon, Broadway's long-reigning king of comedy, dies at 91

By [Adam Bernstein](#)

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August 26 at 11:40 AM

Neil Simon, the Pulitzer- and Tony-winning author of such plays as “The Odd Couple,” “Barefoot in the Park” and “Lost in Yonkers,” who died Aug. 26 at 91, was often called the world’s most popular playwright after Shakespeare.

Time magazine proclaimed him the “patron saint of laughter.” His shows, with an arsenal of sarcastic wit, became highly entertaining staples of high school and community theaters, and they popped up on stages as far away as Beijing and Moscow. But mostly, he dominated Broadway like no other playwright of the past half-century.

Hardly a year passed from 1961 to 1993 without a new production by Mr. Simon, a colossally successful run of comedies and comic dramas on topics such as romance, adultery, divorce, sibling rivalry, cancer and the fear of aging. Several are regarded as classics of 20th-century American theater.

Frequently, Mr. Simon’s plays centered on white, middle-class Americans — mostly New Yorkers and mainly Jews — but the characters were universally relatable. He considered himself “an investigator” of the quotidian. “I don’t write social and political plays, because I’ve always thought the family was the microcosm of what goes on in the world,” Mr. Simon told the Paris Review in 1992. “I write about the small wars that eventually become the big wars.”

His output included dozens of plays, the scripts for five hit musicals, more than 20 screenplays and two volumes of memoirs. Many of his earliest shows were directed by [Mike Nichols](#), who once said that much of Mr. Simon’s work will endure because of its “recognizability” — mining laughs from situations familiar to a vast middle-class public.

“You’d hear an ‘aah’ from the audience, a sound of ‘My God, that’s me,’” Nichols, the director of films that included “The Graduate,” once told the New Yorker. “‘That’s me, that’s you, that’s Uncle Joe, that’s Pop.’”

In the late 1960s and again in the mid-1980s Mr. Simon had four shows on Broadway simultaneously, the only times since [Avery Hopwood](#) in the 1920s that a playwright had achieved such a feat. His mind

was a ceaselessly creative engine, turning out original movie scripts and screen adaptations of his own plays at a fantastic clip. “And I work at the post office during Christmas,” he quipped.

Because of his works' commercial power, Mr. Simon's stage and film projects often attracted big names, including Robert Redford, Jane Fonda, [Walter Matthau](#), [Jack Lemmon](#), Nathan Lane and Maggie Smith.

He helped make a star of Matthew Broderick with “Brighton Beach Memoirs” (1983), which ran for three years on Broadway. That play centers on Mr. Simon's stage alter ego, Eugene Jerome, whose thoughts at 14 mostly run to sex and baseball. He uses wisecracks to deal with an overbearing mother, who asks him, “What would you tell your father if he came home and I was dead on the kitchen floor?”

Eugene: “I'd say, ‘Don't go in the kitchen, Pa!’”

His crowning early comic achievement was “The Odd Couple” (1965), which became a [hit film](#) and [TV sitcom](#) and introduced two characters now embedded in pop culture: the sloppy, fun-loving Oscar Madison and the fussy neatnik Felix Ungar. The friends — one divorced, the other about to be — share a New York apartment and bicker like spouses.

“Everything you do irritates me,” Oscar finally explodes. “You leave me little notes on my pillow. Told you 158 times I can't stand little notes on my pillow. ‘We're all out of cornflakes. F.U.’ Took me three hours to figure out F.U. was Felix Ungar!”

The New Yorker theater critic John Lahr once praised the show for its “exquisite precision” of language.

Mr. Simon said most of his works involved seemingly incompatible couples “being dumped together in a confined space, physically and emotionally.” Among them were “[Barefoot in the Park](#)” (1963), about newlyweds awakening to their deep differences, and “The Sunshine Boys” (1972), about former vaudeville partners who can't stand each other but are forced into a televised reunion.

There was also “Laughter on the 23rd Floor” (1993), Mr. Simon's fictionalized account of working for the volatile and brilliant TV comic [Sid Caesar](#) in the 1950s. (At 26, Mr. Simon joined a writing staff that included Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner and [Larry Gelbart](#).)

Mr. Simon won Tony Awards for “The Odd Couple” and “Biloxi Blues” (1985), the latter being part of his semi-autobiographical trilogy that included the long-running shows “Brighton Beach Memoirs” and “Broadway Bound” (1986).

He collected the Pulitzer Prize for drama and another Tony for “Lost in Yonkers” (1991), a comedy set in 1942 about multigenerational domestic conflict. The most gripping moments, critics said, involved a tyrannical German-Jewish matriarch who clashes with her emotionally childlike adult daughter.

“Lost in Yonkers” brought Mr. Simon the dramatic credibility he long sought. But he said the hardest show he ever wrote was the door-slamming farce “Rumors” (1988), about socially prominent friends who try to hide what looks like an attempted suicide by a deputy mayor of New York.

Mr. Simon explained, “It’s got to be funny almost every 15 seconds,” a steep challenge even for a writer who described himself as a disciplined loner who was happiest when he spent his day with only a typewriter for company.

Susan Koprince, author of “Understanding Neil Simon,” said that many of his plays will endure because they “reflect the foibles and desires of average, middle-class people.” She added that although Mr. Simon made his reputation with spirited comic banter, his often-overlooked midcareer works struck a “wonderful balance between humor and poignancy.”

Among them: “Plaza Suite” (1968), a bittersweet trio of one-acts set in the same New York hotel room; “The Last of the Red Hot Lovers” (1969), about a lonely married man’s hapless attempts at infidelity amid the sexual revolution; and “The Prisoner of Second Avenue” (1971), about the breakdown of a middle-aged executive who has been sacked from his job.

At a basic level, Mr. Simon said he wrote about himself, his family and his friends. He grew up poor in Depression-era New York, a situation made desperate by a woman-chasing father who abandoned the family eight times.

As an adult, Mr. Simon endured periods of depression, his first wife’s death of cancer at 41 and three turbulent later marriages, including one to actress Marsha Mason. He became one of the country’s wealthiest writers, reportedly making \$60,000 a week by the late 1960s on his Broadway shows alone. He said he was driven by the fear that “all this money and fame — someone will take it away from me.”

In the 1980s and ’90s, Mr. Simon faced a backlash from powerful critics who thought that his serious-themed works were concerned more with setting up a punchline than presenting fully rounded characters. He was often faulted for dipping his toe into mature themes without risking a high dive into full-scale tragedy, and not risking more politically or socially daring plays.

Lloyd Rose of The Washington Post noted that “Lost in Yonkers,” in which child abuse emerged as a theme, surrendered its dramatic potential to tension-reducing gags. “What stops Simon from following his darker impulses to an honest conclusion?” she wrote. “He softens his fury and pain as if, finally, he didn’t want to bother us with them.”

Mr. Simon responded to such opinions in his 1999 memoir, “The Play Goes On.”

“I have been accused by critics of trying to sugarcoat the pain with laughter,” he wrote. “I always thought the humor was the instrument I used to first reach people, and then, as an extension of the characters

and stories, I would deliver the underlying issue, the pain that so many of us want to avoid at any cost.”

Humor as refuge

Marvin Neil Simon was born in the Bronx on July 4, 1927. He grew up in Manhattan, where his father worked as a salesman in the Garment District. At 3, Neil earned his lifelong nickname, “Doc,” because he toted a toy medical kit and diagnosed everyone as sick.

With his father's absences, his mother was forced to take in boarders and send her older son, [Danny](#), to live with other relatives. Mr. Simon also recalled the trauma of being about 7 and seeing his father on the street with another woman. He told his mother and begged her to keep it secret, he recounted to the New York Times.

“But when he came back, she insisted: ‘Go on. Tell your father what you saw.’ So I told him. And he said: ‘You didn’t see me. You’re lying. You’re making it up.’ I ended up getting it three ways. My mother betrayed me. I betrayed my father. And my father betrayed me. It was so awful it’s stayed with me my whole life.”

He took refuge in Charlie Chaplin movies and the droll humor of author Ring Lardner. As a teenager, Mr. Simon helped Danny write comedy sketches for employee shows at a local department store and later for the CBS radio personality Goodman Ace. During World War II, Mr. Simon served in the Army Air Forces and did basic training in Biloxi, Miss.

In addition to Caesar, Mr. Simon wrote sketches for the TV stars Phil Silvers and Garry Moore — mostly, he said, to steal typing paper during the three years it took him to finish his first play, “Come Blow Your Horn.”

The comedy, about two brothers who do not want to enter their parents's waxed-fruit business, was a modest success on Broadway in 1961 and became a film starring Frank Sinatra.

Mr. Simon wrote scripts for musicals that included “Little Me (1962), “Sweet Charity” (1966), “Promises, Promises” (1968) — based on [filmmaker Billy Wilder's](#) executive-suite satire, “The Apartment” — and “They’re Playing Our Song” (1979).

He also worked uncredited to punch up “A Chorus Line” (1975), adding one of the show's best-remembered lines: “to commit suicide in Buffalo is redundant.”

Among Mr. Simon's original screenplays were the anti-New York satire “The Out-of-Towners” (1970), the sleuthing spoof “Murder by Death” (1976) and “The Goodbye Girl” (1977), which featured Mason and Richard Dreyfuss (in an Oscar-winning role) as reluctant Manhattan apartment-mates who fall in love.

In October 1976, Mr. Simon wed Mason — three months after the death of his first wife, Joan Baim. His play “Chapter Two” (1977), about a widower who suffers guilt from his remarriage, foreshadowed the collapse of the Simon-Mason union.

His third and fourth marriages, both to Diane Lander, also ended in divorce. She had been working at the perfume counter of the Beverly Hills Neiman Marcus store when he first wooed her with the line, “If I had your phone number, I could call you and you could turn me down then.”

In 1999, he married actress Elaine Joyce. In addition to his wife, who lives in Manhattan, survivors include two daughters from his first marriage, Ellen Simon and Nancy Simon, both of Santa Barbara, Calif.; a stepdaughter he adopted, Bryn Lander Simon; two stepchildren, Taylor Van of Beverly Hills, Calif., and Michael Levoff of Manhattan; five grandchildren; and a great-grandson.

Mr. Simon died at a hospital in Manhattan of pneumonia, said his friend Bill Evans, director of media relations for the Shubert Organization production company in New York.

Many of Mr. Simon's later comedies, including “Jake's Women” (1992) and “The Dinner Party” (2000), had short Broadway runs, but his most venerable plays were revived with new generations of stars.

In a 2010 interview with the Jewish Chronicle, he recalled he thrill of getting some of his first laughs while writing for Caesar, one of the biggest stars on television.

“In the writers' room you fought for your life and your laughs,” Mr. Simon said. “Sid Caesar would sit in the middle. He would come in the morning, take his pants off and sit on a stool in his shorts.

“We would have to get his attention to be heard, only instead of raising your hands like schoolchildren we were screaming,” he continued. “I sat next to Carl Reiner because I knew I could talk to him and, through him, I could get my lines through. And Carl would say: ‘Neil's got it, Neil's got it!’ That's how I learned, and after a while it was time to move and start on a play.”

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8/27/2018

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