

Who is the King of Comedy Writers?

Story by: Steven Wong Photographs by: Kylee Michelle Huddleston

On February 17-March 4, 2012, STAGE RIGHT will present Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* at the historic Crichton Theatre in downtown Conroe. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Neil Simon is one of America's most productive and popular dramatists. He is a master of one liners. But who is Neil Simon and what makes him a likely candidate as King of Comedy Writers?

Growing Up Simon

Neil Simon was born in New York on the

Fourth of July in 1927. His father - a garment salesman - disappeared from time to time, leaving his wife, Mamie, to support their two sons by working at a department store. When his parents divorced, Neil lived with relatives. He received the nickname "Doc" as a child because he was always pretending to be a doctor. He loved comedy films and was often thrown out of movie theaters for laughing too loudly.

Neil and his older brother Danny were very close and they co-wrote material for standup co-

medians and radio shows. Danny encouraged him to pursue writing while in the United States Army Air Force Reserve program. His childhood love of comedy stuck, and his writing was inspired by the work of his favorite comics.

Learning From His Brother

After the army, his brother Danny got Neil a job in the Warner Brothers' mailroom. They began working together again and wrote comedy for TV shows starring Jackie Gleason and Phil Silvers. Then Danny and Neil joined Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, a ground-breaking, comedy-variety series of the '50s. The live, 90-minute weekly program paved the way for a similar show: *Saturday Night Live*. *Your Show of Shows* was a creative romp for the writers which included Mel Brooks (The Producers) and Carl Reiner (The Dick Van Dyke Show).

Even when Danny gave up writing to become a TV director, Neil continued writing comedy. Eventually, Neil became bored with writing for TV alone and began writing plays. Neil's first play - *Come Blow Your Horn* - has a character based on his brother Danny and is about two brothers who moved away from home and shared an apartment - just like Neil and Danny did. The play was later made into a movie starring Frank Sinatra.

It was not until Neil's second play - *Barefoot in the Park* - that he found critical and financial success. Neil's personal experience of newlyweds adjusting to married life became the basis for *Barefoot in the Park*. *Barefoot in the Park* ran for four years on Broadway and later became a movie starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda. He is the only playwright to have four Broadway productions running simultaneously (*Sweet Charity*, *The Star-Spangled Girl*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Barefoot in the Park*).

His third play, *The Odd Couple*, introduced two famous characters: Felix and Oscar. These loveable characters move in together to save money and find that they have the same problems living with each other as they did with their wives. According to Neil the story of *The Odd Couple* "happened to two guys I know - I couldn't write a play about Welsh miners".

Crys McClure
as Corie - the
free spirit and
Richard Wilcox
as Paul - the
conformist



Neil Simon's
**Barefoot
in the Park**

FEBRUARY 17TH THROUGH MARCH 4TH



Patrick Slagle as Mr. Velasco and Yvonne Nelson as Mrs. Banks

Using Comedy to Address Serious Topics

In the 1970s Neil made an effort to treat serious issues with comic touches. Plays included *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, the story of a married man in a mid-life crisis; *The Gingerbread Lady*, an alcoholic singer struggling to make a comeback; and *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, a recently fired business executive who has a nervous breakdown.

Neil continued to create characters who struggle to handle their feelings in difficult situations and who release tension with humor. Playwriting provided a means to channel his boyhood dreams of escaping from his family problems. During this time he wrote *The Sunshine Boys*, *The Good Doctor*, *California Suite*, *The Out-of-Towners*, *Chapter Two* and *The Goodbye Girl*. He has received four Academy Award nominations for his screenplays.

If you asked anyone what their favorite Neil Simon comedy is, you likely would get a different answer from each person. Usually the choice is related to a personal experience that is expressed in a particular play. While each of Neil's plays has elements that I like, my personal favorite is *The Goodbye Girl*. Naturally, a favorite show or play is much like your favorite food. There is no right or wrong.

Is Neil Simon the King of Comedy Writers? That's hard to say. The writers from Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* were an incredibly talented group that went on to impact TV and films for many years. Between the Academy Award nominations, the multiple plays on Broadway simultaneously, and his skill with one-liners, Neil could certainly be a contender for such a title as the King of Comedy Writers.

A Valentine Show

Why *Barefoot in the Park* in the month of February? Besides the obvious choice of a romantic comedy, it was Neil's first successful play representative of his style of writing that made him successful. Additionally, it was written earlier in his career when language wasn't needed to make a script funny or relevant.

We will be collecting canned goods for the Montgomery County Food Bank during the run of the show. Bring some non-perishable goods to help your neighbors from February 17 to March 4 and enjoy *Barefoot in the Park* at the Crighton! ♦



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