



The Collected Plays, Vol. 1

Neil Simon

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"If Broadway ever erects a monument to a patron saint of laughter, Neil Simon will have to be it." —**Neil Simon** This first volume of **The Collected Plays of Neil Simon** contains the triumphs that put Neil Simon's unique brand of comic genius on the American stage, and made him the most successful playwright of his generation. His mixture of verbal wit and beautifully crafted farce, ethnic humor and insight into universal foible, and above all compassion and understanding, make even his sharpest barbs touch the heart as well as the funny bone. These seven plays, beginning with his unforgettable debut, **Come Blow Your Horn**, make us laugh uproariously even as we indelibly identify with the objects of our laughter.

The Collected Plays, Vol. 1 Details

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Tumpale says

Apparently, I like Neil Simon plays...huh.

Bruce says

This should be 3 1/2 stars, really, but then, it's an essential anthology. Now I've had volumes 1-3 of *The Collected Plays of Neil Simon* on my bookshelf for quite some time (and fair warning, I also discovered Volume 4 at the library), and as their thin acidic leaves turn yellow and brittle, it finally dawned on me that I'd better take them down to determine once and for all whether they were there to flesh out my 'good intentions' pile of never-read doorstops, essentially staking out space solely for thespian street cred or if they actually merited their place as cherished read-reads for sharing with my future self and other return visitors to my home library. Sure, it took Simon's memoir *Rewrites* to goad me into pulling these down, but imagine my chagrin and delight to discover that I'm in fact already familiar with the contents of many of these plays! Well, there's age for you.

The interesting thing (to me) about this, is that it's not the plots that stayed recognizable to me, but rather many of the schticky passages and bits of bantering dialogue. Now it could be that I only browsed them earlier, or possibly that useful puzzle pieces of memory are dropping from my brain as I advance toward senility. But what does it say about the plays themselves that, taken as a chunk, they are susceptible to fading as much in hard copy as in the wetware of my mind?

The publication is also a bit of a hodgepodge as the chronology of works been disrupted (both within and between volumes). The musicals of the '60s are the most buttered out among the three books... not sure why that is... perhaps it took longer to clear the rights to the lyrics, perhaps as better-known works the publisher was hoping to spread out the 'hits' so to speak, or perhaps there was some other reason... or no reason at all. All this is worth noting, though, for those who might wish to approach these books as definitive statements on the order and evolution of the author's output. That's a logic that can only be deliberately imposed by the reader; the books themselves won't help with this. Personally, I think it's best to take these in as strikes your fancy; there doesn't seem to be any logical intent to the way they've been assembled even within each volume. My rating of each of these tomes reflects an average of my ratings for the plays they contain, which were collected (more or less) in the chronological order of their writing and appearance on the stage.

Come Blow Your Horn – 3 stars; I find myself consistently struggling to remember this forgettable (if inoffensive) first effort, in which a 21 year old runaway comes of age while his 33 year old brother finally settles down and finds responsibility. There is some (minor) autobiography here regarding a coming-of-age initiation by his older, more socially-facile brother, who hired a prostitute to provide him with his first sexual experience, a humiliating ordeal which Simon revisits just as humorously elsewhere (most explicitly in Vol. 2's *The Good Doctor*). According to Simon, *Horn* would have died had it not been for an assertive word-of-mouth marketing campaign, and he credits his first producer with his eventual career for that insight and confidence into how fine a financial line Broadway draws between failure and success.

Barefoot in the Park – 4 stars; fortunately for Simon, this next effort (as directed by Mike Nichols and starring a pre-Sundance Robert Redford) was a huge smash. Simon again draws on (and hyperbolizes) his

personal experience of a newlywed couple's first apartment. It's funny, but a bit dated: features lots of Mad Men-esque drinking and its moral is pretty male-centric. For a heterosexual marriage to succeed, the wife's job is to "make him feel important" and the husband's reciprocal duty is to ask her to "Tell me how much to spend." Ah, yes... just so we better understand why young adults in the '60's were so ripe for liberation.

The Odd Couple – 5 stars; this is the one Neil Simon play everyone's at least heard of, its popularity fueled not only by a successful film adaptation (Walter Matthau as cantankerous slob Oscar Madison w/ Jack Lemon in the fastidious neatnik Felix Unger role originally played by Art Carney), but by a long-running syndicated television series as well (Jack Klugman and Tony Randall, respectively, though the television scripts were inspired by Simon's work and not written by him; in fact, thanks to the recommendations of one of string of dopey business managers, Simon didn't even get paid for the lucrative series (or the film) beyond his original fixed licensing fee. This one is biographical, as well, in that it derives from what Simon saw when he visited his older brother and roommate in Los Angeles. Neil proposed that his brother use the material as a basis for a television sketch, but his brother deferred the plot device back, and the rest is cultural history.

The whole shebang is best summed up by the following famous exchange:

Felix: "That's not spaghetti, it's linguine."

(Oscar hurls the plate of pasta against the wall of the kitchen.)

Oscar: "Now it's garbage."

The Collected Works, Vol. 3 has Simon's own adaptation/re-make of the play called "The Female Version" in which all the gender roles are reversed (Chita Rivera and Sally Struthers apparently took the leads for the original performance, and a pair of suave, English-language mauling Spaniards replace the flighty British Pigeon sisters here). There are two things noteworthy about this change. The first is why Simon felt the need to rewrite any of the lines/situations at all. Everything remains parallel and the critical plot/comedic catharses remain (spaghetti/linguine, for example), only now the ladies are playing *Trivial Pursuit* instead of poker, and their tastes run more to diet soda and Dubonnet than beer and booze. It's a bit surreal, and not a little sexist.

The other is that the original's three act structure has been condensed to two (the third act becomes the third scene of the second act), which makes some of the character transitions seem a bit sudden. I think this says more about the changing mores of contemporary theater, than Neil Simon's playwriting. Broadway's two act arc as exemplified by Neil Simon's later works is also distinct from Hollywood's traditional three act structure of character & conflict introduction/conflict development toward pivotal moment of catharsis/climactic conflict resolution (as an intermission-less continuum). I'm not sure what to make of this structural difference, really, other than to suppose that audiences grow accustomed to different narrative experiences, in the same way that (at least subconsciously), regular concert-goers must expect an opening sonata-form movement (theme 1, theme 2/thematic development & bridge/thematic recap) in their symphonies.

The Star-Spangled Girl – 2 stars; swing and a miss! If I didn't know this too had been inspired by real-life events, I'd have never believed it. However, this play was inspired by his getting to witness a heated argument at an after-party between Paddy Chayefsky and the wife of one of the original 7 astronauts whose identity at p. 240 of Rewrites Simon is no longer quite sure about. Be that as it may, Simon considered this a failure because he was too inexperienced (and lazy) to imagine the young conservative woman as anything

other than a southern belle cartoon (as opposed to a flesh-and-blood Mary Matalin). I'm not so sure that's the whole problem here. While it's certainly true that Connie Francis' interaction with liberal hothead Richard Benjamin lacks intellectual underpinning, far more critical is the fact that a mutual attraction sufficient to overcome mutual contempt lacks any motivation whatever, as does the whole of the play's events (no one seems a bit perturbed or surprised that she should routinely have to literally beat back the unwanted advances of madcap-stalker (and Richard Benjamin roommate/literary collaborator) Tony Perkins. Still, this play does contain some of Simon's funniest schtick:

Norman (*smitten*): "What could I do for her that's very small and very personal?"

Andy: "How about brushing your teeth?"

(*Norman checks his breath against his hand, recoils, and shrugs: clearly, it's an idea worth considering.*)

Promises, Promises - 5 stars; 4 for the play itself and another for the Bacharach-David score. This is an adaptation of Billy Wilder's film *The Apartment*, but really makes a nice companion to the Frank Loesser satire *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (especially if you imagine an ingenuous Matthew Broderick/Jerry Lewis type playing the lead). In *Promises*, the key to success is to let a lower-Manhattan apartment out to sex-starved execs. in exchange for career advancement. Bacharach-David's only musical features *I'll Never Fall in Love Again* and may be the only light romantic comedy to feature attempted suicide as a major plot device. Act I closes with a number that the page alone cannot do justice to. It's Donna McKechnie doing *Turkey-Lurkey Time*, and while not fair in a book review, this seems as good as any excuse to promote Seth Rudetsky's explanation of it. *Promises, Promises* is currently in revival with the effervescent Kristin Chenoweth (albeit not featured in this clip or song), I'd like to think on the strength of both recent Bacharach nostalgia and the popularity of this number's inclusion in the aptly-named movie, *Camp*.

Plaza Suite – 3 stars, averaged out. This is the first of the "suite" trilogy of trilogies that includes *California Suite* (in Vol. 2, to which I link because Goodreads has erroneously ambiguated them as multiple editions, as opposed to the unique collections they are) and *London Suite* (in Vol. 4). As such, it showcases Neil Simon fetish for economy of both content and setting. The first economy is clearly practical in nature, by maximizing the viability of material for a playwright who creates his works free of written outlines. The downside of this approach can be seen in occasionally meandering stage action in which characters are more often better delineated than theme or conflict, and – as observed by Simon himself – a sheaf of unfinished manuscripts left to simmer in a desk drawer until such time as writer's block or curiosity suffice to return them to the light. What better way to treat sketches of more extreme characters or situations unsuited to an entire evening than via anthology? Too, some comedic situations clearly are sufficient only to sustain a single act's worth of action, better suited to service as a vignette in a theme-and-variations motif. However, running throughout almost all of Simon's plays is a fetish for all action to take place in a single room. This makes for less expensive sets, of course, but Simon's agoraphobia frequently drives conflict and plot, his characters repeatedly insisting that others come to their quarters, preferring room service and homemade meals to restaurants, and suffering nervous breakdowns which preclude their taking staged action for as much as a forecurtain walk in the park.

Plaza gives the audience three takes on marriage:

- A 2-star, rambling, unfunny on-paper indictment in which a 50-something couple's 23rd anniversary is derailed by the husband's inexplicable need for an affair. Perhaps more sense translates from the acting, since the dialogue is fairly vague (lots of words, little information).

- Next, a 3-star satire on a well-known stereotype, the Hollywood big-shot as insincere sexual predator, where a two-time loser at the altar seduces an all-too-willing star-struck former high school fling – herself martially unfulfilled – into a one-night stand.

- Finally, a short 4-star uproar schtick; the increasingly hysterical parents of a panicky bride-to-be try to coax her (unsuccessfully) out of the bathroom until the groom comes through with the winning solution, one that is riotously funny in its ironic banality. (I refuse to say what it is.)

Last of the Red Hot Lovers – 3 stars; another one that has all the longevity of your average theatrical twinkie. This one is definitely theme and variations. James Coco is a mid-life crisis schmo who tries and fails three times to have an affair in his elderly mother's apartment while she's out on errands. In Act I, the outcome is mutual awkwardness (because his target is too honest and earnest about what she came for); in Act II, it's sheer farce (because she's a vacuous pothead); and in Act III, it's dramedy (because she's clearly a depressive who mirrors his own self-loathing). So guess who he falls back on in the end? Can he even successfully bed his wife? Somewhat oddly, the entire plot is rehashed in a single extended monologue (see p. 653), a wholly unnecessary bit of déjà vu which invites the audience to see the play for the absurdity it is.

Steph says

Standouts:

The Odd Couple - *** and a half
Come Blow Your Horn - *** and a half

Sharone says

This collection is for the most part outstanding. I think *The Star-Spangled Girl* is generally underappreciated. Very few authors make me laugh out loud as consistently as Neil Simon.

Christina says

A very witty and entertaining collection of plays. Sometimes they felt more like writing exercises than actual plays, but no matter. I enjoyed them all!

Erin says

It's tough to rate an anthology, but I gave it a bump up from 3 or 3 1/2 stars simply because it's interesting to see the progression of his writing. It varies in quality from *The Star Spangled Girl*, which I had never heard

of - and it turns out, for good reason - to *The Odd Couple*, which is very funny as it is on paper. (That is, funny without even needing funny actors to make the lines funny.)

I can't say I understand the love for *Barefoot in the Park* - am I the only one who doesn't love this play? - but even when the plays aren't great, they're at least pleasant to read.

For fans of Neil Simon or theater-goers in general.

Greg Kerestan says

Neil Simon influenced the modern sitcom more than anyone else- the rapid back-and-forth bickering, cleverly mundane turns of phrase, and wit that was Jewish in sarcastic, self-deprecating humor but WASP in delivery came to birth just about every modern trope and rhythm of television multicam comedy. The first volume of Simon's collected plays is full of masterpieces, "*Barefoot in the Park*" and "*The Odd Couple*" prominent among them. Some of the lesser-known works here are well worth mention, such as "*Star-Spangled Girl*," "*Come Blow Your Horn*" and "*Promises, Promises*," his libretto to a musical by Burt Bacharach.

Emily says

Neil Simon is hilarious. I used several excerpts from this book as pieces for my theatre class in college and scored myself an A. In general I prefer to see plays than read them, but this book is still worth it.

Tracey says

Yeah, he's funny.

Leah W says

Why was I allowed to read Neil Simon at age 13? This is what happens when you let a child wander the adult stacks of the library. No wonder I went bad and moved from rural Oklahoma to the big city.

See also: "*Annie Hall*", Why was I allowed to view at age 12

Ahnnie says

A delightful book that's full of humor and through each character you can see the personality shining through the words on the page. The book made me realize that writing plays are all about capturing scenes and writing them down. It's not hard but it's not easy -- all it takes is a tad of humor and a tad of skill in writing.

j_ay says

Most if not all of these surely work better on the stage (or screen), as comedy doesn't generally read well. and some characters (liek Felix) come off as whiny and annoying...

Come Blow Your Horn ****o

Barefoot in the Park ***oo

The Odd Couple ***oo

The Star-Spangled Girl **ooo

Promises, Promises ***00

Plaza Suite **ooo

Last of the Red Hot Lovers **ooo
