CHAPTER - I

Neil Simon: A Literary Phenomenon
Neil Simon is indisputably one of the most successful and distinguished American playwrights of the present time whose very popularity seems to have militated against his receiving as much critical attention as his work warrants. Though acknowledged as the foremost exponent of American Comedy, he is often dismissed as a writer whose chief interest lies in keeping his audience laughing rather than in creating warm and significant characters. Such a sweeping assessment is not only palpably unjust and untenable but also indicative of an inability or a refusal to recognise his achievement in drawing on humour to unmask the ambiguities, ironies, anamolies and evasions marking family and other relationships. However, it may be mentioned that several of his plays are marked by seeming superficiality, since they abound
in situations bordering on the farcical. But his astounding success on the Broadway is in part attributable to his projection of familiar predicaments rather than situational problems confounding one's attempt to solve, as also of the traps into which well-meaning people fall because of blundering. Again, it needs to be recognised that Neil Simon has americanized the Ibsenite tradition ridding it of its melodramatic element or formulas of sociological or psycho-social import. Its significance derives from the fact that several American playwrights like Clifford Odets, Sidney Howard, Maxwell Anderson, Lillian Hellman, Irwin Shaw of the Pre-World War II period and even the so-called 'mood' playwrights of the post-war period like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, Frank Gilroy and David Rabe have identified themselves
with the Ibsenite tradition. Further, Simon does make a departure occasionally from domestic realism so as to point to the prevalent corruption of values in the American society at large or 'shallowness of modern life' like the other social dramatists, though not to the extent of investing drama with the air of a courtroom. Again, he has not turned his plays into a harrowing 'family drama of guilt and blame', since his purpose, he averred, is to show how 'absurdly people live their lives'. Using a variety of 'stylistic formats' and of domestic settings he has presented credible characters who, though in the beginning are frightened of the world in which they are situated, in the end come to terms with it through a graceful turn of phrase, a joke, or what is sentimentally put forward as an axiomatic truth. Indeed, his view of man may seem bourgeois in that
he suggests that though a man stands up for his independence and experiments with what life offers him, he eventually seeks the traditionally rich human experience concerned with love, marriage and the family. But his popularity is due to his steering clear of excessive rationalizing in exploring family situations and issues entertainingly through the exploitation of the resources of language including the use of gags as also to his adhering to 'family realism' in his projection of experience.

Neil Simon's phenomenal commercial success as a dramatist is attributable to his being neither didactic nor severely satirical in projecting the conflicts, frustrations and betrayals that mark family relationships and those of friendship.

His plays are for the most part structurally simple with a single plot line relying for
their effect on humour that is traceable to unexpected fashioning of the turns of phrase. The humour is often farcical, especially in the earlier ones, not spontaneous but contrived, not genial but heartless. One gets the impression that his characters would die with a cheeky wisecrack.

His characters are not distinctly individualized but are variations of types, whose speech and concerns are reminiscent of Simon's Brooklyn Jewish heritage. Moreover, to extricate his characters from difficult situations, Simon, 'sometimes substitutes the microstructure of the joke for the macrostructure of the drama' which suggests the difficulty that Simon has with regard to the structuring of his plays that may be ascribed to his writing verbal rather than situation comedy.
Simon's plays present a comic world-view through the use of comic forms ranging from the very serious to the farcical and the absurd, expressive of an engaging tolerance of human folly. They are marked by a subtlety and an innovativeness that bring out his commitment to experimentation with structure and language. They are informed by warmth and humour, often blended with poignancy, that make for mass appeal.

Neil Simon's achievement will appear all the more remarkable, if considered with the background of the development of modern American drama, which acquired an American theatrical tradition only with the traditional advent of David Belasco and Eugene O'Neill. It is a tradition, which, strangely enough, steered clear of radically avant-garde influences until
recent times. Commenting on the state of American drama in 1954, Robert Brustein, Dean of Yale School of Drama, observed:

American drama seems to be the most mundane form of legitimate culture since 18th century sentimental comedy, a form to which it has more than a little resemblance. Our serious drama is informed by a debased Freudinism and our comedies are set in motion by man-chasing women.¹

Though Brustein's view was realistic and unquestionable at the time when it was expressed, the Post-World War II American drama did start reflecting the radical intellectual and cultural trends which marked the 1950's and 1960's. This is evidenced by the production of the works of new playwrights produced in make-shift theatres.
Off Broadway like the Circle in the Square and Phoenix Theatre which staged Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* (1952) starring Geraldine Page and directed by Jose Quintero and Kopit's *Oh, Dad Poor Dad Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad*, respectively.

In 1953, Joseph Papp who had successfully organised his New York Shakespeare Festival started presenting new plays (as well as conventional ones) by such writers as Charles Gordone, David Rabe, Ed Bullins and David Mamet which brought to the fore new talents. Meanwhile, the avant-garde theatre began to take shape when theatres Off Broadway helped stage plays by Wilson, Paul Forster, Sam Shepard and Ross Alexander.

1964 is a significant year in the annals of the modern American drama, since it was in
that year that LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* as well as the first plays of Sam Shepard were staged. It was in the same year Susan Sontag published her essay, 'Against Interpretation', which criticised 'the Interposing of meaning between an auditor and direct experience of art'. The tragic war in Vietnam elicited a response that expressed itself through street and guerilla theatre. Likewise, the Black Rights Movement helped the emergence of a powerful Black theatre. By the 1970s the American drama had fully assimilated the avant-garde tendencies as exemplified by the work of Robert Wilson, Richard Forman and Lie Breuer.

Their work, described as the Theatre of Images by Bonnie Marranca, used painting and sculpture within a proscenium arch to offer the viewer an experience of meditative
dream (Wilson), broke up the continuity of consciousness into the bits and pieces of imagining (Forman) and concentrated on images of essential being (Breuer).²

Though drama has not been as much of a 'culture-specific phenomenon' as fiction, the playwrights of the Post-World War II had responded to the prevalent socio-political happenings through their dissatisfaction with the liberal, democratic structures governing American life and culture and in the process helped generate a kind of counter-culture, especially in the 1960s characterized by an ideation that considered language corrupted by the immoral politics of the day. They have sought satisfaction and even redemption in mysticism and Eastern Philosophies and in art opted for such practices as would bring about political, sexual and artistic emancipation. The 'mood' of the
time was cryptically spelt out thus by Richard Schechner:

Ink World where law fails ....

lawlessness and chaotic sensuality are attractive. ³

Obviously, Schechner's 'law' that failed related to both government and artistic pursuits, although there developed a new awareness, especially among the young, of the importance of authenticity in life which expressed itself through ideas of sexual liberation considered as a prelude to political liberation - ideas elucidated by Wilhelm Reich in his works, The function of Orgasm (1942) and Character Analysis (1945). The logic underlying Reich's ideas, which, in a sense, echo those of D.H. Lawrence, is that orgasmic sexuality makes for 'total health' needed for the emergence of a nation of healthy individuals who can be expected to build healthy institutions.
These ideas are in tune with those of Norman O. Brown who in his *Life Against Death* (1959) and *Love's Body* (1968) underlined the need for regarding sexuality as being inherent in social life as also for resolving the dichotomy between the mind and the body, which Herbert Marcuse in his work, *Eros and Civilization* (1955) had discussed in making Freud relevant to sociology conditioned by socialist ideology. Further, a new interest in Eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism, developed presumably because of its insistence on the need for affirmation of being and experience, since what would happen would happen, which meant the unquestioning acceptance of chance as an ingredient of experience.

Significantly, the American theatre in recent times came to be shaped by the ideas expressed in Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*
(1958) and Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968). Artaud's vision of the theatre is in a sense revolutionary in that in reacting against language and even plot it confronts the spectators with such disturbing images of extreme cruelty as would make them eschew cruelty in their own lives. Grotowski's view of the theatre is essentially actor-oriented as it considers the illusionist theatre to be poorly equipped.

Neil Simon's career as also his phenomenal commercial success as a playwright which began with his play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, in 1961 stands out as it offers a significant perspective on the developments in the American theatre, referred to above - a perspective that underlines the enduring appeal of comedy and of such traditional themes as focus on marriage and the family bond. It is not
its ability to create a mood instantaneously unlike tragedy, which requires a build-up, as also to the absence of the metaphysical dimension in which the modern sceptical mind has little interest that accounts for the popularity of the comedy. It is its capacity for making the ordinary men and women engaged in ordinary pursuits respond to the situations projected by it, while entertaining them with all its resources.

Significantly, Neil Simon's comedies are based on such life-situations as have little to do with the contemporary issues with which American society has had to contend—issues like the wars, drug menace, racial violence and energy depletion, although they do not lack contemporary interest. Their themes, for the most part, focus on mismatched couples, misfits, the generation gap, unpleasant
neighbours and unhelpful friends and such other issues affecting social or family life. They are not fashioned to offer any comment on the chaos in the American life and culture as his younger contemporary and New Yorker of Jewish background, Arthur Kopit, does in plays like *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung you in the Closet* and *I'm So Sad*, which bears a subtitle, *A Pseudoclassical Tragifarce in a Bastard French Tradition*. The 'Bastard French Tradition' referred to by Kopit is no other than *The Theatre of the Absurd* popularised by Ionesco and Beckett.

The distinctiveness of Neil Simon's use of farcical satire in some of his plays can be made out if compared to that of Terrence McNally whose plays bearing such cryptic titles as *Next* (1967), *Tour* (1967), *Botticelli* (1968), *Cuba Si!* (1968) *Witness* (1969),
Whisky (1972) and The Ritz (1975) are essentially extended anecdotes tinged with political satire. The distinction between them lies in their being directed towards different ends as observed by Ruby Cohn:

Co-opting existential anxieties, Neil Simon's characters evoke Broadway laughter. Less anxious and less coherent, Terrence McNally's characters present an unconventional surface; they may utter obscenities, shed their clothes, indulge in sexual deviation, and yet they do so with charm and without offence.⁴

Though moving in the same direction that American comedy has taken with the advent of playwrights like Neil Simon, Lanford Wilson in plays like Balm in Gilead (1965), Gingham Dog (1969), Semon Sky (1970) besides
plays about the Talley family of Lebanon, Missouri, The Fifth of July (1978) and Talley's Folly (1979) employs humour to soften situations involving misfits. As observed by Ruby Cohn:

McNally manoeuvres his figures through the mechanics of farce, whereas Wilson allows a leisurely humour to mellow situations involving misfits, and neither peppers his plays with machine-gun jokes that have brought fame and fortune to Neil Simon. This variety of Broadway surfaces is deceptive, for the form rarely strays from realism - Simon and Wilson - or broad satire - Kopit and McNally. Neither socially nor aesthetically do their plays threaten the loose, vaguely liberal, and mainly affluent Broadway audience.
The humour in the plays of Neil Simon, McNally and Wilson is in part traceable to the jokes figuring in them explicitly or implicitly, some of which may broadly be identified with the two kinds of jokes which Freud has defined so as to distinguish between them. As pointed out by Eric Bentley:

Freud distinguishes two kinds of jokes one which is innocent and harmless and one which has a purpose, a tendency an end in view. He distinguishes in turn two kinds of purposes: to destroy and to expose, to smash and to strip. Destructive jokes fall under such headings as sarcasm, scandal and satire, denuding jokes under such headings as obscenity, bawdy and ribaldry. But whatever the kind of jokes they employ, they do not stand out like the icing on the cake but are woven into the fabric of the
play, which has the effect of making them seem inevitable.

It may be noted that Neil Simon's success as a writer of comedy lies in being able to draw on the various sources of humour - verbal and situational, in particular - to impart a kind of cutting edge to his depiction of character and incident in his plays. The life that he has led seems to have fitted him appreciably for the kind of drama he has fashioned.

Born in New York on the 4th of July, 1927 of Jewish parentage, Neil Simon was one of the five sons of Irving Simon, a garment salesman, and Mamie Simon and had the shattering experience of seeing his father repeatedly walk out of his family, which seemed to have given rise to his strong belief in the importance
of marriage and family unit that found expression in several of his plays. To get over his depression Neil went to the movies, especially those featuring Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy, which he enjoyed so much that quite often he was dragged out of the movies for laughing too loud; and it is no wonder that as a playwright, his aim was "to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them would pass out." 7 Again, as a child, his favourite pastime was to examine people with a toy stethoscope which earned him the nickname, DOC, and which habit of examining people seemed to have stood him in good stead in later times when he attempted to portray characters. While studying at De Witt Clinton High School, Neil Simon was particularly drawn to Mark Twain, Robert Benchley,
and George S. Kaufman the great American
humourists. He was not a very bright student
and on graduating in 1943 at the age of sixteen
he took up employment in the garment district
which was back-breaking as he had to lift
heavy things. Indeed, when asked why he did
not exert himself too much to become a writer
he replied, "When I was sixteen, I worked
in the garment district lifting heavy things.
Now I just sit at a typewriter and get cookies
and milk when I want them."

To fulfil his ambition to become an Air
Force Pilot, he joined the Army Air Force
Reserve Training Programme, while being a
student of Engineering at New York University,
but he did not finish college, which gave
him a sense of inferiority at times, which
he aptly summed up as "being in a room where
everybody speaks French but you". After
serving for a short period at Lowry Field, Colorado, he was discharged in 1946. Soon he found a job in the mail-room of Warner Brothers' New York office where his older brother, Danny, was employed in its Publicity Section. The two brothers working together to write comedies composed of witt patter for a show by Abraham and Straus employees. Later, they were engaged by Goodman Ace for fashioning a comic routine which proved successful and which helped them to establish themselves as comedy writers. Indeed, in the next four years their services were sought among others by Phil Silvers, Jerry Lester and Jackie Gleason and they wrote for shows included in the famous Borscht Circuit performed in resort hotels. It was at that time Simon married a dancer, Joan Baim, by whom he had two children, Ellen and Nancy. Danny and Simon scored their
most notable success with the sketches they composed for a Broadway show, *New Faces of 1956*, which was 'a hit of the season'. Later, their collaboration ended when Danny settled down on the West Coast to become a Director and Simon a television comedy writer for the reputed NBC's "Your Show of Shows" featuring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. Simon was later given the prestigious Emmy Award in 1957 for his contribution to the "Sid Caesar Show" and for "Sergeant Bilko" featuring Phil Silvers, in 1959.

Neil Simon's career took a significant turn when after finishing an assignment for a Jerry Lewis show ahead of schedule, he started writing his first play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, which he could finish only after three years. Later speaking about his play he said:
Having read a lot of books on playwriting
I knew that you should write about
what you know. I figured, O.K.,
I know my family, so I'll do something
about how my older brother Danny
and I left home and took our first
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apartment.

Years later, looking back on his maiden
attempt at playwriting, he observed that the
play

in the time it was written, seemed
like a monumental effort. Today,
it seems like the crude markings
in a cave by the first prehistoric
chronicler.

Neil Simon's judgement on his highly
successful play may seem harsh, but it points
to his having perfected his art which has
brought him unprecedented success on the Broadway.

It is noteworthy that unlike Neil Simon, some of his distinguished contemporaries have opted for a consistency that is based on the
stylistic and not the thematic - playwrights like David Rabe and John Guare. Having served in Vietnam, Rabe unlike McNally in Botticelli, Wilson in Fifth of July and Guare in Muzeeka - treats of the war theme in The Basic Training of Paulo Hummel (1971) in a disturbingly realistic manner by delineating the life of a soldier from the basic training to death in Vietnam in the life of Pablo who filled with visions of becoming a war hero opts for combat duty only to die in a brothel wounded by a grenade thrown at him by his sergeant trying to snatch away his (Pavlo's) habitual prostitute. Interestingly, his Broadway play, Sticks and Bones (1971), received the Tony Award in competition with Neil Simon's Prisoner of Second Avenue presumably because Simon's prisoners of Second Avenue (Edisons) appear to be less realistically drawn than Rabe's prisoners of a middle-class
home environs (Nelsons) involving a typical American set-com family which feels its well-being threatened by the presence of blind David. John Guare in his play, *Bosoms and Neglect* (1980) shows a penchant for wit and farce like Neil Simon, which results in the sacrificing of credibility, since the play with Strindbergian overtones features bizarre scenes marked by unbelievably eccentric behaviour.

Unlike some of his contemporaries mentioned above Neil Simon in his comedies has consistently addressed himself to such commonly faced issues as mismatch, divorce, extramarital sexual involvement, incompatibility, the ennui and the boredom marking urban middle class life. He is principally concerned with the exploration of human relationships which are conditioned by the traits of the individual characters engaged in meeting the onslaughts of life. It is, therefore,
not surprising that incompatibility which is the source of misunderstanding, dissension and psychological conflict is a principal theme of several of his plays, especially *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), *The Odd Couple* (1965), *Chapter Two* (1977), and to a lesser extent in *Plaza Suite* (1968) and *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* (1969). The crises in these plays arise because of the differences in the attitudes and perceptions of the characters concerned which are dealt with comically so as to bring out their inherent unreasonableness and even absurdity. In no other play of his is it so sharply focused as in *Barefoot in the Park* which centres on the differences that surface between the newly married Corie and Paul Bratter. Like any young bride Corie is an irrepressible romantic who enters her new home... looks
around, and sighs as though the world were just beginning. For her, it is.

(Italics mine)

Expecting to turn it into an idyllic love-nest, Corie finds her husband unsympathetic to her aspiration as he is wrapped up in his own visions of making his way up in the world. Corie's mother, Mrs. Banks, is perspicacious enough to make out the differences in their attitudes to life as she tells her daughter:

I worry about you two. You're so impulsive. You jump into life.
Paul is like me. He looks first.\(^{13}\)

Paul being level-headed and practical minded watches with growing resentment his wife's bizarre behaviour which is climaxed by her arranging a date
for her mother with Victor Velasco in an attempt to bring them together. The crisis gets dissolved when each of them starts to appreciate and accept the other for what he or she is, which provides rich comedy. They are able to accept each other only when they realize that:

> they will never be—or want to be—facsimiles of each other.  

which underlines what the play seeks to suggest:

> the practical and the romantic should work in tandem.

which view stems from the belief that moderation is a primary virtue.

*The Odd Couple,* as suggested by the title itself, concerns the incompatibility marking the relationship between the friends, Oscar
Madison, a divorcee owning a flat and homeless Felix Ungar, who experiment with 'living together'. Oscar, slovenly and given to dissolute ways, clashes with Felix with his obsessive passion for tidiness and order inevitably when they come to live together, since neither of them is prepared to accommodate the other's point of view. Ironically, their own past experiences have not altered their ways, as observed by Walter Kerr:

Those two men haven't learned anything from their marital quarrels that will help them share an apartment now that will help them next time around... they aren't going anywhere, except into new failures.

In Chapter Two, too, it is incompatibility that frames the play featuring George Schneider,
a writer, who is torn between the memory of his first wife, Barbara, and his love for Jennie Malone whom he courts, as he considers his admission of love for Jennie a betrayal of his love for Barbara. Their differences become all the more acute as soon as they return from their honeymoon, and get dissolved only when they realize:

that one must accept a continuing connection to life even in the face of tragedy, and assume that commitment without self-pity or guilt, but with responsibility to and respect for those who stand ready to make life worth the living.\(^{18}\)

In basing some of his comedies on the theme of incompatibility, Neil Simon shows his interest in tracing the distortions in human relationships to incongruities-
be they of character or of situation - and he does so in a manner that is comic eschewing the sentimental.

Although one may quote what Robert Benchley said of O'Neill's play, *Morning Becomes Electra* that "he gives us nothing to think about... but he does thrill the bejeezus out of us"\(^{19}\) so as to describe Simon's comedy, it is undeniable that few playwrights have created a comedy that is unfailingly enjoyable while drawing attention to what makes or mars human relationships as Neil Simon who has created a comic universe that not only resounds with peals of laughter but also helps correct the distorted perceptions of life.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


13. Ibid., p.131.


