

*ACU Theatre Presents:*



*A Complete Study Guide*



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## An Introduction

When reflecting on *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, Cary M. Mazer (Associate Professor of English and Theatre Arts, University of Pennsylvania) says,

“If Simon's play is about anything, it's about how anxiety fuels comedy: anxiety about McCarthy, blacklisting, Stalin, the bomb, and about the NBC executives who cut the show's length, the show's budget and finally the show itself.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's just a nostalgia piece about that one brief shining moment when these particular funny people got to be funny in that particular room.”

## About the Playwright: Neil Simon



“Since 1960, a Broadway season without a Neil Simon comedy or musical has been a rare one. His first play was *Come Blow Your Horn*, followed by the musical *Little Me*. During the 1966-67 season, *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Odd Couple*, *Sweet Charity* and *The Star-Spangled Girl* were all running simultaneously; in the 1970-71 season, Broadway theatergoers had their choice of *Plaza Suite*, *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, and *Promises, Promises*. Next came *The Gingerbread Lady*, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *The Good Doctor*, *God's Favorite*, *California Suite*, *Chapter Two*, *They're Playing Our Song*, *I Ought to Be in Pictures*, *Fools*, a revival of *Little Me*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues* (which won the Tony Award for Best Play), the female version of *The Odd Couple*, *Broadway Bound*, and *Rumors*. *Lost in Yonkers*, which won both the Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize

for Drama in 1991, was followed by *Jake's Women*, the musical version of *The Goodbye Girl*, and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.

Neil Simon began his career in television, writing for *The Phil Silvers Show* and Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*. Mr. Simon has also written for the screen: the adaptations of *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Odd Couple*, *Plaza Suite*, *Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *California Suite*, *Chapter Two*, *I Ought to Be in Pictures*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Lost in Yonkers*. His other screenplays include *The Out-of-Towners*, *Murder by Death*, *The Goodbye Girl*, *The Cheap Detective*, *Seems Like Old Times*, *Only When I Laugh*, and *Max Dugan Returns*.

The author lives in California. He is married to Diane Lander and his three daughters, Ellen, Nancy, and Bryn.”

-A brief overview of playwright Neil Simon's writing credits, pulled from *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* "About the Playwright".

## History of the Play

*Laughter on the 23rd Floor* opened on Broadway at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on November 22, 1993 and closed on August 27, 1994 after 320 performances and 24 previews.

Directed by Jerry Zaks the cast featured Nathan Lane (Max), Ron Orbach (Ira), Randy Graff (Carol), Mark Linn-Baker (Val), Bitty Schram (Helen), J. K. Simmons (Brian), and Lewis J. Stadlen (Milt). The show had 320 total performances.



The show then opened on the West End with Gene Wilder starring in 1996. Paramount produced a movie version in 2001, starring a prominent portion of the original Broadway cast.

# Specific Content

## Headlines of 1953

### In Politics

- Joseph Stalin dies, March 5, 1953, and Malenkov becomes Soviet premier; Beria, minister of interior; Molotov, foreign minister (March 6).
- East Berliners rise against Communist rule; quelled by tanks (June 17).
- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg executed in Sing Sing prison (June 19).
- Korean armistice signed (July 27). The Korean War (1950-1953)

### In Science

- Edmund Hillary of New Zealand and Tenzing Norgay of Nepal reach top of Mt. Everest (May 29).
- Moscow announces explosion of hydrogen bomb (Aug. 20).
- James Watson, Francis Crick, and Rosalind Franklin discover structure of DNA.

### In Literature

- Ernest Hemingway wins Pulitzer for *The Old Man and the Sea*.

-The Pulitzer Prize for Drama is awarded to the play *Picnic* by William Inge

### In U.S. Events

-Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower inaugurated President of United States (Jan. 20)

-Alleged Communist Charlie Chaplin leaves U.S. for good. Justice Dept. warns him any attempt to reenter the country will be challenged.

-George C. Marshall (U.S.) wins the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1953.

### In Sports

-World Series: NY Yankees d. Brooklyn Dodgers (4-2)

-NBA Championship: Minneapolis Lakers d. New York (4-1)

-Stanley Cup: Montreal Canadiens d. Boston Bruins (4-1)

-NCAA Basketball Championship: Indiana d. Kansas (69-68)

-NCAA Football Championship: Maryland (10-1-0)



## **The Cold War and the Red Scare**

The ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation had a great impact on American domestic life as well. People built bomb shelters in their backyards. They practiced attack drills in schools and other public places. The 1950s and 1960s saw an epidemic of popular films that horrified moviegoers with depictions of nuclear devastation and mutant creatures. The Cold War was a constant presence in Americans' everyday lives.

The advances of communism around the world convinced many U.S. citizens that there was a real danger of "Reds" taking over their own country. Figures such as McCarthy and Hoover fanned the flames of fear by wildly exaggerating that possibility.

As the Red Scare intensified, its political climate turned increasingly conservative. Elected officials from both major parties sought to portray themselves as staunch anticommunists, and few people dared to criticize the questionable tactics used to persecute suspected radicals. Membership in leftist groups dropped as it became clear that such associations could lead to serious consequences, and dissenting voices from the left side of the political spectrum fell silent on a range of important issues. In judicial affairs, for example, support for free speech and other civil liberties eroded significantly. This trend was symbolized by the 1951 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Dennis v. United States*,

which said that the free-speech rights of accused Communists could be restricted because their actions presented a clear and present danger to the government.

Americans also felt the effects of the Red Scare on a personal level, and thousands of alleged communist sympathizers saw their lives disrupted. They were hounded by law enforcement, alienated from friends and family and fired from their jobs. While a small number of the accused may have been aspiring revolutionaries, most others were the victims of false allegations or had done nothing more than exercise their democratic right to join a political party. Though the climate of fear and repression began to ease in the late 1950s, the Red Scare has continued to influence political debate in the decades since and is often cited as an example of how unfounded fears can compromise civil liberties.

## **Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism**

In February 1950, appearing at the Ohio County Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy gave a speech that propelled him into the national spotlight. Waving a piece of paper in the air, he declared that he had a list of 205 known members of the Communist Party who were "working and shaping policy" in the State Department.

The next month, a Senate subcommittee launched an investigation and found no proof of any subversive activity. Moreover, many of McCarthy's Democratic and Republican colleagues, including President Dwight Eisenhower, disapproved of his tactics ("I will not get into the gutter with this guy," the president told his aides). Still, the senator continued his so-called "Red-baiting" campaign. In 1953, at the beginning of his second term as senator, McCarthy was put in charge of the Committee on Government Operations, which allowed him to launch even more expansive investigations of the alleged communist infiltration of the federal government. In hearing after hearing, he aggressively interrogated witnesses in what many came to perceive as a blatant violation of their civil rights. Despite a lack of any proof of subversion, more than 2,000 government employees lost their jobs as a result of McCarthy's investigations.

## **Popular Culture**

In 1953 Lucille Ball and her real-life husband, Desi Arnaz, were starring in one of the most popular shows on American television, *I Love Lucy*. In January, Ball had a baby—both in real life and on her show. Her pregnancy and the birth of her baby became a national event that captivated her audience. A pre-filmed segment of the show showed Lucy and her husband going to the hospital to have the baby, and the show was broadcast only a few hours after the real birth. More than two-thirds of the nation's television sets tuned in, an audience of around 44 million viewers. Far fewer people watched the next day when television broadcast a presidential inauguration.

*I Love Lucy* was so popular that some people actually set up their work schedules around the show. Marshall Field's, which had previously held sales on the same night the show was on, eventually switched its sales to a different night. A sign on its shop window explained, "We love Lucy too, so we're closing on Monday nights." A relatively new medium, television had swept the nation by the mid-1950s.

Early television programs fell into several main categories including comedy, action and adventure, and variety-style entertainment. Many of the early television comedy shows, such as those starring Bob Hope and Jack Benny, were adapted from

popular old radio shows. Benny enjoyed considerable television success with his routines of bad violin playing and stingy behavior.

Variety shows such as Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town* provided a mix of comedy, opera, popular song, dance, acrobatics, and juggling. Quiz shows attracted large audiences, too, after the 1955 debut of *The \$64,000 Question*. In this show and its many imitators, two contestants tried to answer questions from separate glass-encased booths. The questions, stored between shows in a bank vault, arrived at the studio at airtime in the hands of a stern-faced bank executive flanked by two armed guards. The contestants competed head-to-head, with the winner returning the following week to face a new challenger.

## Style of the Play

### *Your Show of Shows*

The *Max Prince Show* within the play is directly based on the real life 90-minute television show *Your Show of Shows* starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca.



The show ran from February 25, 1950, through June 5, 1954. The show was formatted as a variety show, similar to today's *Saturday Night Live*, featuring comedic and satirical sketches as well as musical numbers and other such entertainment routines.

## Comedy



The comedy depicted in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* features many elements. One aspect is the well-known “set-up, punchline” bit. As comedy writers, this style of comedy often appears as both intentional and impromptu throughout dialogue.

Physicality is a major comedic style of the play. The appeal and humor of this physicality comes out of its over the top nature and its unexpected context.

As the physicality is heightened, so too is the dialogue. Max Prince is the king of employing nonsense phrases and jargon, going as far as giving entire monologues about completely fictional history, to prove his point to his writing staff. This, like many other bits throughout the play, creates endless instances of unintelligible, uncontrollable comedy.

## Thoughts to Think

While this production most certainly provides an evening of blissful entertainment, Neil Simon leaves us with some meaty issues to chew on. Here are two ideas we can take a moment to consider:

### **What political parallels can we draw from the play?**

In the play, the writers are faced with fear-fueled politics amongst the Red Scare and McCarthysim, which directly affects their lives and their jobs. What similarities can we draw from today's politicians and policies? What reflection can be seen in today's hot button issues such as gun control, immigration, and civil liberties? These are thoughts to think.

**As Christian artists, what can we draw from Neil Simon's message?** Of all the connections between the play's themes and the Christian metanarrative, one in particular sticks out. The premise of a group of writers, a family, working on a television show with an uncertain future, brings to mind a particular lesson from the book of Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 7:14, when speaking on wisdom, tells us, "When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider this: God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything



about their future” (NIV). This play smartly shows how different characters choose to react to an uncertain tomorrow. In our own lives, to which character would we most relate? How could this change how we live each day as Christians? How, as artists, does this impact the focus of our work? These are thoughts to think.

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Dramaturg's Note:

This study guide, for Abilene Christian University's spring 2016 production of *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, was compiled by dramaturge Joseph Lee Burnam, under the guidance of ACU Theatre faculty member Kari Hatfield. Joseph is a senior theatre directing major at Abilene Christian University. This guide is presented for referential and educational purposes, in an effort to enhance the overall theatrical experience.