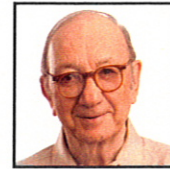


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A LIFE IN THE THEATRE by Mervyn Rothstein

Stage professionals look back at decades of devotion to their craft

NEIL SIMON, 82, has been working on Broadway for over 55 years. He has written over 30 plays and musicals, including *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *Lost in Yonkers* and three Tony Awards, and a Broadway theatre is named after him. A revival of the 1968 musical *Promises, Promises*, for which he wrote the book to Burt Bacharach and Hal David's score, opens in April at the Broadway Theatre.



JOAN MARCUS

Promises, Promises is being revived (with Sean Hayes and Kristin Chenoweth). How did the original show happen?

I had a meeting with producer David Merrick, who said he wanted to do a show with me. I had always admired *The Apartment*, the Oscar-winning Billy Wilder movie with Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, so I said I wanted to make a musical out of it.

What made you get into this business?

My brother, Danny, wanted to become a comedy writer and do movies. Once I started seeing plays I was hooked...having no idea how difficult it would be to write a play, get it on, and have a career doing that.



(Left) Simon in 1966. (Right) Outside the Neil Simon Theatre, re-named for Simon on June 29, 1983.



After you and Danny wrote comedy for TV, you eventually worked for Sid Caesar, the great 1950s TV comic. What was that like?

Working for Sid Caesar was amazing, with geniuses like Carl Reiner and Larry Gelbart and Mel Brooks. Sid was insanely funny.

How were you growing as a writer?

I began to think that if I was going to write about people I had to understand why and how they were doing what they were doing, where they hoped to get to, what life was about for them. I started to learn that it's not all about the laughter. It's about the feeling the audience gets.

Your first Broadway play was *Come Blow Your Horn*, in 1961, a comedy about brothers.

It took me almost two years, because I rewrote and rewrote. I said, 'I got my foot in the door—now I have to get the rest of me in.'

Your first major success was *Barefoot in the Park*. It was about you and your first wife.

It was easy to write because it was about our first apartment, about getting married and living together without knowing how to do that. Everything was real, pretty much. We walked barefoot in the park—actually, I wouldn't, but she did. It was a summer night and she took off her shoes and said, 'Why aren't you taking off your shoes?' She said, 'There's something wrong with you. You're afraid to walk barefoot in the park.' I thought, 'Bingo! Play title!'

Do you have a favorite play?

Brighton Beach Memoirs and *Broadway Bound*. They were about my family: my mother, my father. Eighty percent of the things in the plays happened. Some ugly things happened, which I never would have put in had my father still been alive. I didn't want to make him or anybody a villain. I wanted them to be who they were. And the audiences can make up their minds for themselves.

Are you working on a new play?

I've gone back to a play I started a long time ago. The title is *Waiting for Poppa*. I found it in the closet and read it and I said, 'I've got to take this out.' I'm having a lot of fun with it. ♦