



The Collected Plays, Vol. 4

Neil Simon

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Since 1960, a Broadway season without a Neil Simon play has been a rare one. For more than thirty years, Simon's wry and astute observations on life, love, and the human condition have been making audiences laugh uproariously even as his beautifully realized characters touch their hearts. These five plays, including the Pulitzer- and Tony-award-winning *Lost in Yonkers*, show Simon at the pinnacle of his extraordinary career.

Rumors Lost in Yonkers Jake's Women Laughter on the 23rd Floor London Suite Including the author's introduction: "How to Stop Writing and Other Impossibilities"

The Collected Plays, Vol. 4 Details

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From Reader Review The Collected Plays, Vol. 4 for online ebook

Elizabeth says

Neil Simon is a great comedy writer. His plays focusing on humor or simple plots are quick-paced and funny. However, as his subject matters become more complex and serious, so does his humor, negating the effectiveness of his writing. I really enjoyed "Lost in Yonkers," "Rumors," "London Suite," and "Laughter on the 23rd Floor." "Jake's Women" never caught my attention, perhaps because of the subject matter. As a high school student I could find no way to relate to a long-winded, petulant writer struggling with his marriage. The play failed to engage me, and instead of plowing through it I chose to move on to Simon's more interesting works. As I never completed "Jake's Women," I cannot fairly condemn the entire plot or say that it is as dull to the end as it is in the beginning, but merely that it failed to engage me as a high school reader.

Kathy says

It's been years since I've read plays, probably not since my undergraduate days when they were assigned. I don't know where this came from, but I enjoyed the mix of serious drama with comedy, as is true of most of Simon's work. These were written between 1988 and 1993; some I had heard of and/or seen, others were new to me. It tempts me to read more.

Bruce says

Now, I've had volumes 1-3 of The Collected Plays of Neil Simon on my bookshelf for quite some time, 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.

I was planning to read them in order, but a funny thing happened when I got to Simon's introduction to Volume 3... it was all about the plays in this volume (all save the last). So that led me to do a bit of digging and when I discovered the library had this one, well, naturally I had to pursue my curiosity. Volume 4 is a puzzling anthology in contrast to its predecessors, in that it publishes a mere five plays (as opposed to seven or eight). It's not clear why, since at the time of publication both the 1993 Broadway musical version of *The Goodbye Girl* (adapted by Simon from his original screenplay) as well as 1997's *Proposals* were available for inclusion. Perhaps Simon & Schuster was saving these for a future collection (and I note that anyone has yet to collect his screenplays). At any rate, as of this review, the internets tell me that Simon has since had at least three other plays produced (2000's *Dinner Party*, 2001's *45 Seconds from Broadway*, and 2003's *Rose's Dilemma*). Oh, and Neil also pumped out something in 2004 called *Oscar and Felix: A New Look at the Odd Couple*, which appears to be just an updating of his original script with more contemporary references. (If true, this would mark the fourth time he's personally re-veneered his biggest hit). All in all, given the availability of another 5-6 previously uncollected plays, the fact that an unprecedented six years have passed

since the last "new" Simon production, and what with the valedictory of Simon's being awarded the Mark Twain prize in 2006, hasn't the time come for someone to publish a Volume 5 of his *Collected Works*?

All this remains worth noting 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. But enough dawdling. On with the shows!

Rumors - 4 stars; the first act lives up to the play's billing for classic, by-the-book farce (comedy of errors and confusion, based on a hysterically escalating series of misunderstandings). Doors slam, people make alternate entrances, run up and down the stairs, drop behind couches, etc. It's the 10th wedding anniversary dinner party of a wealthy, powerful couple, and the well-to-do guests are desperate to avoid scandal of an incapacitated host (shot through the earlobe) and missing hostess. With all this plot, the characters are reduced to mere caricatures of myopia, meanness, martyrdom, and manipulation, but that's all part of the fun. The pacing slows down a bit in Act II and it's patently obvious from the git-go that the play's set-up is beside the point, but – excepting the cheap Polish joke at p. 32

COOKIE: "I just don't understand why we're all wearing our best clothes to cook a dinner."

CLAIRE: "That's not your best clothes. It's a fifty-year-old Polish dress."

COOKIE: "A sixty-year-old Russian dress."

– it's otherwise pretty hard to beat this show as an example of Simon's tour de force mastery of comedy-writing craft.

Lost in Yonkers - 3 ½ stars; it's a good play, but not a great one (see my earlier comments regarding *The Gingerbread Lady* in my Vol. 2 review), and I can't for the life of me figure out why this (presumably autobiographical) slice of 1940's hardship earned Neil Simon the Pulitzer Prize. A pair of adolescent boys are left to contend with their emotionally-crippled, authoritarian German Jewish grandmother for 10 months while their father travels the country selling scrap metal to pay off loan shark debt (incurred to pay the medical expenses of their dead mother, so you know the predicament is supposed to be sympathetic). In coping with being wards of a woman who is all tough and no love, the kids end up as a window/catalyst for the de-infantilization of their autistic Aunt Bella, but absent any clear resolution for its characters – the kids are there for 10 months, and that's it – the play's ending feels a bit unsatisfying.

Jake's Women - 3 stars; Jake is a writer struggling to work out his emotional detachment issues with his second wife from whom he has become estranged and legally separated a decade after the death of his first wife. Some Freudian parental angst is mixed in, too, though this is easily the weakest aspect of the play. Does any of this plot sound familiar? Yes, here's another good, pointedly autobiographical play (psychodrama, really, as much of the action takes place in the protagonist's mind). And once again Simon serves up an unsatisfying ending, although here the problem is not lack of a clear catharsis, but an overly hasty one. As in *Gingerbread Lady*, the ending fails because of its apparent insincerity. The protagonist is told he needs to demonstrate a psychological breakthrough, so he simply summons it up. For how long will this last? And why should we care? Which brings us to...

Laughter on the 23rd Floor - 2 stars; Neil Simon tells us in his intro to Vol. 3 (which is oddly devoted to

the works presented in this volume, a primary reason I chose to read them out of order) that he worried *Jake's Women* was self-indulgent and so, after several rewrites and tryout stagings, eventually shelved it. Unlike *Jake's Women*, *Laughter* was fairly successful, but it is far more self-indulgent in that it is simply a nostalgia piece: the writers and host of *Your Show of Shows* bid adieu to their place on broadcast television. Preferring to freeze fond friendships in time than tell a tale, Simon eschews story in favor of remembered truth. There could have been conflict: will Max Prince leave the show? Will Ira Stone (or anyone) have to be fired? Will Lucas (Simon's stand-in for himself) make the show's exceptional cut for comedy writers? Will the show survive? Etc.

Unfortunately, rather than focus on and develop any of these possible threads, time simply passes filled by the characters' aimless banter and endless one-liners. I mean characters in the loosest possible sense, too, since the lack of apparent conflict deprives the population of this play of meaningful definition beyond their respective function as a vehicle for dialogue. Instead of people, we have a Russian accent, a token Irish guy, a token woman, a hypochondriac, and an undifferentiated group of wise-cracking mouth-breathers. *Laughter* is an amusing trifle, but a trifle all the same. Despite or perhaps because of Simon's sepia patina, this work has all the emotional resonance of your average knock-knock book.

London Suite - 3 stars, if you're generous and round upward; see my review of *Plaza Suite* (Vol. 1) for my general thoughts about Neil Simon's adoption of the anthology form. After the playlet which inaugurates this collection, this version is the least successful of his three "suites" inasmuch as it revisits premises better exploited by Simon elsewhere. Set here in an historic London hostelry we have:

- A 5-star turn in which a writer interrogates his embezzling manager at gunpoint. As this is the one original piece in the collection, it merits some further comment. First, it's noteworthy as a revenge fantasy in light of Simon's lament regarding his own personal lack of business savvy and poor judgment in selecting financial managers. Second, by reducing an otherwise engaging comeuppance caper to lines of exposition in the implausible setting of a luxury hotel room (a luxury hotel not being perhaps the first place I'd take my kidnap victims), the playwright has squandered an opportunity to create a far more engaging story that dramatizes its action in situ. Imagine limiting the presentation of *The Usual Suspects* to a straightforward 20-minute police room dialogue between Chazz Palmentieri and Kevin Spacey, and this is what you get. Economical, sure, but how could Simon have failed to exploit the potential of a full-length work?

- A 3-star dramedy in which a woman encourages her mother to re-open herself to romance six years following the tragic early death of her (the mother's) husband. Premise sound familiar? A wonky date (again related as post-hoc exposition) leads to the mother's big reveal that she was already involved with a married man (albeit one whose spouse has been and is expected to remain in a vegetative state for some time). How will the daughter react to this information? I'm not sure the resolution (or story) makes sense, though. While it makes sense to withhold information about the mother's current romance from the audience to impose a dramatic arc, the nature of the revelation undermines the logic of the plot: if the mother is in fact already emotionally committed to someone who needs her and reciprocates her affection, then neither she nor her daughter have any reason for her to go solo on an impromptu date the last night of a shared weekend getaway. I suppose in short efforts such as this, the audience is not expected to have time to think about that, but it's the kind of thing that really annoys me as a reader.

- A 2-star tear-jerker that mashes up *California Suite*'s British couple visiting the Oscars with the pair of divorcees negotiating custody. Here the negotiation is about ultimate custody of the man, who is dying from lung cancer. There's just insufficient opportunity to invest in the protagonists for this to be involving.

- Finally, we have the now-obligatory farce (1-star, alas) that combines the signature events of *California*

Suite's vacay-from-hell scene with the back-pain schtick elaborated in *Rumors*. In this one, the setup to the back spasm takes so long, one wonders if Simon drafted this on the fly as filler material. The playwright tweaks his original ending (everyone writhing in agony on the floor) by insinuating John Cleese's *Fawlty Towers* manager to obviously overstep the damage.

By assigning to his characters names (Diana, Grace, and Sitgood et al. in the back-spasm farce) that Simon has the characters mock – an author's apologia to his audience, if ever there were one – it is clear that Neil Simon was simply mailing it in for *London Suite*.

If I've learned nothing else from my Neil Simon marathon (soon to be concluded with my review of [Volume 3](#)), it's how even mediocre facets of a larger body of work contribute to an overall appreciation of an artist's aesthetic sensibility. Simon himself is on record as believing his prolific output to have resulted in a little more than a handful of material he is proud to leave behind. As one of Simon's various personae contends in *London Suite* (pp. 302-303):

My talent is... used up. It doesn't keep filling itself over and over again, flooding the banks of your mind like the river Nile every spring. It dries up... cracks under the searing pressure of critics and readers who demand art, high standards, and enormous popularity all at the same time. I did, however, write eight wonderful {works} before the drought set in.

As one who's seen both the original film *The Goodbye Girl* (Marsha Mason and Richard Dreyfuss!!!) and the Broadway musical version (Bernadette Peters and Martin Short???), I can assure you that not only Neil Simon, but also composer Marvin Hamlisch (*A Chorus Line*) and lyricist David Zippel (*City of Angels*) have been put to better use. But it's still a shame a casual reader can't yet revisit these in print. Compulsive completist I may be, yet I find it reasonably galling that there's a full volume of his work as yet unanthologized. I hope Simon & Schuster aren't just waiting on the man to die. As my little foray into Simonology ought to demonstrate, a little obsession goes a long way.

Oh, and could a Goodreads librarian please disambiguate the four volumes? For some reason, GR has these linked as separate editions off volume 1 even though they are wholly distinct.

Brian Levine says

Full disclosure I haven't looked to see the critical acclaim of these plays.

If nothing else, Simon's intro, "Portrait of the Writer As A Schizophrenic" is worth a few stars alone. It is a fantastic glimpse into the mind of a writer that is able to be in the moment while simultaneously analyzing the moment and seeing it from afar (Nora Ephron remarks upon this dichotomy in a similar way). Absolutely excellent.

The Odd Couple- Absolute classic. Must read for American comedy.

Plaza Suite- Really different than his other works in that not only is it not a comedy, but it also drags a little bit. Not bad, but lacked pace.

Barefoot In The Park- Absolute classic. Must read for American comedy.

Come Blow Your Horn- I had never heard much about this play prior to reading it, but I really enjoyed it. A great gem in this compilation, and an excellent use of having only two characters onstage for long periods of time while keeping it entertaining. Several laugh out loud moments.

The Star-Spangled Girl- Easily the best opening to a play I've read yet. The first 15 pages or so are dynamite, but it really slows to a crawl when Sophie enters the show. The dynamic changes and it isn't as fun.

Promises, Promises- The musical adaptation of Billy Wilder's "The Apartment." It's not bad, but save yourself the time and just read The Apartment.

Last of the Red Hot Lovers- The last scene is pretty fun. Other than that it's okay. Doesn't have the same magic with two-character dialogue as Come Blow Your Horn.

Patti says

After reading the Woody Biography, I decided to pick up some Neil Simon.

This collection has some of the famous plays I've heard of before, and some others that just drag. What this book made me realize is that I should be writing plays. It seems so easy.

I enjoyed Rumors most of all. Lost in Younkers was okay and Jake's women seems like it would be really confusing on stage. Laughter made me think of the Woody Allen I had read and seems it would be great to see performed.

I loved the intro by Neil Simon- it might have been the best part of the anthology!
