

The Sunshine Boys

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Introduction

This LibGuide was created to accompany the Visions & Voices event: ***The Sunshine Boys***. On Wednesday October 30th USC students will attend the Ahmanson Theater presentation of ***The Sunshine Boys***. [Read more about the event at the Visions & Voices website.](#)

About the play: "The laughter hits the ceiling when Golden Globe and Emmy Award winner Danny DeVito joins Tony Award and Emmy Award winner Judd Hirsch to tear it up in this outrageous new production of the Neil Simon classic. At the pinnacle of vaudeville, Al Lewis and Willie Clark were the undisputed kings of comedy, before splitting unceremoniously. But when CBS attempts to reunite the legendary double bill for a once-in-a-lifetime television special, the shtick hits the fan and old grudges begin horning in on the act. This U.S. premiere, direct from London and directed by Olivier Award winner Thea Sharrock, brings Neil Simon's classic play to life in what the *New York Times* calls an 'insightful production, surprisingly delicate in its broadness. Perfect harmony.' The play stokes the heart and the funny bone in a show about show business and the true measure of friendship."

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Danny DeVito in The Sunshine Boys



Photo: Johan Persson

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Plot Synopsis and Information About the Play

Plot:

"The play focuses on aging Al Lewis and Willie Clark, a one-time vaudevillian team known as 'Lewis and Clark' who, over the course of forty-odd years, not only grew to hate each other but never spoke to each other off-stage throughout the final year of their act. The stubborn Clark, who was not ready for retirement, resented the wiser Lewis for breaking up the act when he opted to leave show business. It is now 1972 and CBS is inviting the team to reunite for a special on the history of comedy, with the pair representing the vaudeville era at its best. Clark is convinced by his nephew Ben to revive one of the old routines one last time. Much of the humor is derived from efforts to get the two cantankerous actors into the same room for a rehearsal, their differences of opinion once they reunite, and their shenanigans on the actual broadcast.

Neil Simon was inspired by two venerable vaudeville teams. The longevity of 'Lewis and Clark' was inspired by Smith and Dale who, unlike their theatrical counterparts, were inseparable lifelong friends. The undercurrent of backstage hostility between 'Lewis and Clark' was inspired by the team of Gallagher and Shean, who were successful professionally but argumentative personally. Alternate sources say this is based on Weber and Fields.

Theater productions

The Sunshine Boys premiered on Broadway at the Broadhurst Theatre on December 18, 1972, and transferred to the Shubert Theatre and then the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, closing on April 21, 1974 after 538 performances and two previews. Produced by Emanuel Azenberg and directed by Alan Arkin, the original cast featured Sam Levene as Lewis, Jack Albertson as Clark, and Lewis J. Stadlen as Ben. Replacements later in the run included Lou Jacobi as Lewis and Jack Gifford as Clark.

Tony Award nominations went to Simon (Best Play), Albertson (Best Actor in a Play) and Arkin (Best Direction of a Play), and Albertson won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Performance.

The play was revived on Broadway at the Lyceum Theatre, opening on December 8, 1997 and closing on June 28, 1998 after 230 performances and 12 previews. Directed by John Tillingier, the cast starred Jack Klugman as Willie Clark and Tony Randall as Al Lewis.

A West End production of the play, starring Danny DeVito (in his West End debut) and Richard Griffiths, opened on 17 May 2012 and played a limited 12-week season until 28 July. The Blog *A Cultured Lad* spoke very highly of the production and gave it a full five star rating saying that 'Productions like this don't come often. This show glitters, like fireworks on the fourth of July. Absolutely wonderful.' Theatre critic Charles Spencer also gave the show a positive review, with a four star rating and said that 'Thea Sharrock directs a pitch-perfect production that beautifully captures fleeting moments of tenderness in the comedy without ever turning mushy.' The production was scheduled for a run in Los Angeles, but Griffiths' untimely passing delayed it. DeVito's old *Taxi* co-star Judd Hirsch stepped into the role of Lewis, and the show opened Sept. 24, 2013 at the Ahmanson Theatre."

-- Wikipedia


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Theater Resources (Selected)

International Index to the Performing Arts Full Text

"A performing arts resource with over half a million indexed articles, plus detailed abstracts and full text from 1864 to the present, covering theatre, dance and film."

Play Index

"Search over 30,000 plays written from Antiquity to the present and published from 1949 to the present. Play Index covers a wide range of plays including mysteries, pageants, plays in verse, puppet performances, radio and television plays, and classic drama. Search for plays by title; author; subject (sisters, culture conflict, marriage); style (symbolism, experimental theater); genre (comedy, melodrama, musical); cast type; more."

Theatre in Video

"Contains more than 250 definitive performances of the world's leading plays, together with more than 100 film documentaries, online in streaming video - more than 500 hours in all. This release contains 279 titles, representing hundreds of leading playwrights, actors and directors."

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Multidisciplinary Databases (Selected)

Academic OneFile

"Formerly *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Includes abstracts or references for articles from more than 1,500 scholarly, trade and general-interest publications."

JSTOR

"A growing full text collection of core social science, humanities, and science journals. Some backfiles date back to the early 1800s. Fields covered include: anthropology, ecology, economics, education, finance, history, mathematics, philosophy, political science, sociology, literature, and theater."

MLA International Bibliography

"Index to scholarly publication in literature, languages, linguistics, and folklore from over 4000 journals and series published worldwide. Indexing only: no full text."

ProQuest Research Library

"*ProQuest Research Library* is a multi-disciplinary index. It covers dozens of subject areas and indexes thousands of scholarly and general titles and provides full text for a significant number of the articles included. It is an excellent starting place for research for a paper, particularly if one isn't sure where to begin one's research."

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Theater Journals (Selected)

American Theatre

"A consumer magazine featuring reports on plays in print, as well as performances and theater season schedules. Presents current trends in nonprofit American theater. Contains three to four articles in each issue; sometimes the complete text of a short play is included."

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

"The widely acclaimed journal devoted solely to drama and theatre in the USA - past and present. Provocative, thoughtful articles by the leading scholars of our time providing valuable insight and information on the heritage of American theatre, as well as its continuing contribution to world literature and the performing arts."

Theater

"For more than thirty years Theater has been the most informative, serious, and imaginative American journal available to readers interested in contemporary theater. It has been the first publisher of pathbreaking plays from writers as diverse as Athol Fugard, Sarah Kane, W. David Hancock, David Greenspan, Richard Foreman, Rinde Eckert, and Adrienne Kennedy. It has printed writings on theater by dramatists including Heiner Müller, Dario Fo, Mac Wellman, and Suzan-Lori Parks."

Theatre Journal

"For over five decades, *Theatre Journal's* broad array of scholarly articles and reviews has earned it an international reputation as one of the most authoritative and useful publications of theatre studies available today. Drawing contributions from noted practitioners and scholars, *Theatre Journal* features social and historical studies, production reviews, and theoretical inquiries that analyze dramatic texts and production."

Descriptions about the databases and journals are taken from their respective websites.

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Neil Simon and his writing

"Neil Simon (born July 4, 1927) is an American playwright and screenwriter. He has written over thirty plays and nearly the same number of movie screenplays, most adapted from his plays. He has received more Oscar and Tony nominations than any other writer.

He grew up in New York during the Great Depression, with his parents' financial hardships affecting their marriage, and giving him a mostly unhappy and unstable childhood. He often took refuge in movie theaters where he enjoyed watching the early comedians like Charlie Chaplin, which inspired him to become a comedy writer. After a few years in the Army Air Force Reserve after graduating high school, he began writing comedy scripts for radio and some popular early television shows. Among them were *The Phil Silvers Show* and Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* in 1950, where he worked alongside other young writers including Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks and Selma Diamond.

He began writing his own plays beginning with *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961), which took him three years to complete and ran for 678 performances on Broadway. It was followed by two more successful plays, *Barefoot in the Park* (1963) and *The Odd Couple* (1965), for which he won a Tony Award, making him a national celebrity and 'the hottest new playwright on Broadway.' His style ranged from romantic comedy to farce to more serious dramatic comedy. Overall, he has garnered seventeen Tony nominations and won three. During one season, he had four successful plays showing on Broadway at the same time, and in 1983 became the only living playwright to have a New York theatre, the Neil Simon Theatre, named in his honor. During the time between the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, he wrote both original screenplays and stage plays, with some films actually based on his plays.

After winning the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1991 for *Lost in Yonkers*, critics began to take notice of the depths, complexity and issues of universal interest in his stories, which expressed serious concerns of most average people. His comedies were based around subjects such as marital conflict, infidelity, sibling rivalry, adolescence, and fear of aging. Most of his plays were also partly autobiographical, portraying his troubled childhood and different stages of his life, creating characters who were typically New Yorkers and often Jewish, like himself. Simon's facility with dialogue gives his stories a rare blend of realism, humor and seriousness which audiences find easy to identify with.

Early years

Neil Simon was born on July 4, 1927, in The Bronx, New York, to Jewish parents. His father, Irving Simon, was a garment salesman, and his mother, Mamie Simon, was mostly a homemaker. Simon had one older brother by eight years, Danny Simon. He grew up in Washington Heights, Manhattan during the period of the Great Depression, graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School when he was sixteen, where he was nicknamed 'Doc' and described as extremely shy in the school yearbook.

Simon's childhood was difficult and mostly unhappy due to his parents 'tempestuous marriage,' and ongoing financial hardship caused by the Depression. His father often abandoned the family for months at a time, causing them further financial and emotional hardship. As a result, Simon and his brother Danny were sometimes forced to live with relatives, or else their parents took in boarders for some income. Simon recalls this period:

'The horror of those years was that I didn't come from one broken home but five. It got so bad at one point that we took in a couple of butchers who paid their rent in lamb chops.'

During an interview with writer Lawrence Grobel, Simon stated: 'To this day I never really knew what the reason for all the fights and battles were about between the two of them.... She'd hate him and be very angry, but he would come back and she would take him back. She really loved him.' Simon points out that one of the reasons he became a writer was his need to be independent of such family concerns when growing up:

' It's partly why I became a writer, because I learned to fend for myself very early. . . . I began to think early on, at the age of seven or eight, that I'd better start taking care of myself somehow, emotionally.... It made me strong as an independent person.'

In order to escape difficulties at home he often took refuge in movie theaters, where he especially enjoyed comedies with silent stars like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy. Simon recalls: "I was constantly being dragged out of movies for laughing too loud.

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I think part of what made me a comedy writer is the blocking out of some of the really ugly, painful things in my childhood and covering it up with a humorous attitude.... do something to laugh until I was able to forget what was hurting.'

Simon attributes these childhood movies for inspiring him to some day write comedy: 'I wanted to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out.' In referring to Chaplin's influence, Simon noted that it was his 'appreciation of Chaplin's ability to make people laugh that was the only thing that I saw in the future for myself as a connection with people. I was never going to be an athlete or a doctor.'

At the age of fifteen, Simon and his brother created a series of comedy sketches for employees at an annual department store event. During these high-school years, he also enjoyed reading humor by Mark Twain, Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman and S. J. Perelman. Simon recalls: 'I read humorists... I read all the adventure stories... I was at the library three days a week as a kid. I read everything, I think, except the classics—which I'm going to get to one day.'

Soon after graduating high school he signed up with the Army Air Force Reserve at New York University, eventually being sent to Colorado as a corporal. It was during those years in the Reserve that Simon began writing, starting as a sports editor. He was assigned to Lowry Air Force Base during 1945 and attended the University of Denver from 1945 to 1946.

Writing career

Two years later, he quit his job as a mailroom clerk in the Warner Brothers offices in Manhattan to write radio and television scripts with his brother Danny Simon, including tutelage by radio humorist Goodman Ace when Ace ran a short-lived writing workshop for CBS. They wrote for the radio series **The Robert Q. Lewis Show**, which led to other writing jobs, including **The Phil Silvers Show**. Sid Caesar hired the duo for his popular television comedy series **Your Show of Shows**, for which he earned two Emmy Award nominations. Simon credits these two latter writing jobs for their importance to his career. "Between the two of them I spent five years and learned more about what I was eventually going to do than in any other previous experience.' Simon describes a typical writing routine with Caesar:

'There were about seven writers, plus Sid, Carl Reiner, and Howie Morris. Mel Brooks and maybe Woody Allen would write one of the other sketches... everyone would pitch in and rewrite, so we all had a part of it.... It was probably the most enjoyable time I ever had in writing with other people.'

'I knew,' said Simon, 'when I walked into **Your Show of Shows**, that this was the most talented group of writers that up until that time had ever been assembled together.'

Simon incorporated some of their experiences into his play **Laughter on the 23rd Floor** (1993). His work won him two Emmy Award nominations and the appreciation of Phil Silvers, who hired him to write scripts for Sergeant Bilko, of **The Phil Silvers Show**, in 1959. The first Broadway show Simon wrote was **Catch a Star!** (1955), collaborating on sketches with his brother, Danny.

Playwright

During 1961, Simon's first Broadway play, **Come Blow Your Horn**, ran for 678 performances at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. Simon took three years to write that first play, partly because he was also working on writing television scripts at the same time. He rewrote the play at least twenty times, 'And I mean from beginning to end,' Simon notes. He explains why he did the many rewrites: 'It was the lack of belief in myself. I said, 'This isn't good enough. It's not right.' That doesn't mean I could make it better, but I felt I had to try.... It was the equivalent of three years of college.' That play, besides being a 'monumental effort' for Simon, was a turning point in his career:

'Today, it seems like the crude markings in a cave by the first prehistoric chronicler. Still, it was an important step for me. The theater and I discovered each other.'

After **Barefoot in the Park** (1963) and **The Odd Couple** (1965), for which he won a Tony Award, he became a national celebrity and was considered 'the hottest new playwright on Broadway,' writes Susan Koprince in her book on Simon. Those successful productions were followed by others, including **The Good Doctor**, **God's Favorite**, **Chapter Two**, **They're Playing Our Song**, **I Ought to Be in Pictures**, **Brighton Beach Memoirs**, **Biloxi Blues**, **Broadway Bound**, **Jake's Women**, **The Goodbye Girl**, and **Laughter on the 23rd Floor**. His subjects ranged from serious to romantic comedy to more serious drama and less humor. Overall, he has garnered seventeen Tony nominations and won three.

During 1966 Simon had four shows playing on Broadway theaters at the same time: **Sweet Charity**, **The Star-Spangled Girl**, **The Odd Couple**, and **Barefoot in the Park**. His professional association with producer Emanuel Azenberg began with **The Sunshine Boys** during 1972 and continued with **The Good Doctor**, **God's Favorite**, **Chapter Two**, **They're Playing Our Song**, **I Ought to Be in Pictures**, **Brighton Beach Memoirs**, **Biloxi Blues**, **Broadway Bound**, **Jake's Women**, **The Goodbye Girl**, and **Laughter on the 23rd Floor**, among others.

Simon also adapted material written by others for his plays, such as the musical **Little Me** (1962) from the novel by Patrick Dennis, **Sweet Charity** (1966) from a screenplay by Federico Fellini, and **Promises, Promises** (1968) from a film by Billy Wilder, **The Apartment**. During the 1970s he wrote a string of successful plays, sometimes having more than one playing at the same time to standing room only audiences. Although he was by then recognized as one of the country's leading playwrights, his inner drive kept him writing:

'Did I relax and watch my boyhood ambitions being fulfilled before my eyes? Not if you were born in the Bronx, in the Depression and Jewish, you don't.'

Simon has also drawn 'extensively on his own life and experience' for his stories, with settings typically in working-class New York neighborhoods, similar to ones he grew up in. In 1983 he began writing the first of three autobiographical plays, *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983), *Biloxi Blues* (1985), and *Broadway Bound* (1986). With them, he received his greatest critical acclaim. After his 'follow-up,' play, *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), Simon was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

Simon has occasionally been brought in as an uncredited "script doctor" to help hone the book for Broadway-bound plays or musicals under development such as *A Chorus Line*.

Screenwriter

Simon has also written screenplays for more than twenty films. These include adaptations of his own plays along with some original work, including *The Out-of-Towners*, *Murder by Death* and *The Goodbye Girl*. He has received four Academy Award nominations for his screenplays. Although most of his films were successful, movies were always secondary in importance to his plays. Simon explains:

'I always feel more like a writer when I'm writing a play because of the tradition of the theater.... there is no tradition of the screenwriter, unless he is also the director, which makes him an auteur. So I really feel that I'm writing for posterity with plays, which have been around since the Greek times.'

Simon chose not to write the screenplay for his first film adaptation, *Come Blow Your Horn*, preferring to focus on his playwriting. However, he was disappointed with the film, and tried to control his film screenplays thereafter. Many of his earlier screenplays were similar to the play, a characteristic Simon observed in hindsight: 'I really didn't have an interest in films then,' he explains. 'I was mainly interested in continuing writing for the theater.... The plays never became cinematic.' *The Odd Couple*, however, was a highly successful early adaptation, both faithful to the stage play but also more like a traditional film, having more scenic variety.

Themes and genres

Theater critic John Lahr describes Simon's primary theme as being about 'the silent majority,' many of whom are "frustrated, edgy, and insecure." Simon's characters are also portrayed as 'likable' and easy for audiences to identify with, often having difficult relationships in marriage, friendship or business, as they "struggle to find a sense of belonging.; McGovern notes that in his plays there is always 'an implied seeking for solutions to human problems through relationships with other people,' adding that Simon 'is able to deal with serious topics of universal and enduring concern,' while at the same time make people laugh.

One of Simon's 'hallmarks' is his 'great compassion for his fellow human beings,' according to McGovern:

'He shows a preference for conventional moral behavior; however, he has great tolerance for moral fallibility. He suggests mutual concession in personal relationships; however, he never "punishes" those who persist in extreme modes of behavior.'

Author Alan Cooper, states that Simon's plays 'are essentially about friendships, even when they are about marriage or siblings or crazy aunts...'

All of Simon's plays except for two are set in New York, giving them an urban flavor. Within that setting, Simon's themes, besides marital conflict, sometimes include infidelity, sibling rivalry, adolescences, bereavement, and fear of aging. And despite the serious nature of the themes, Simon has continually managed to tell the stories with humor, developing the theme to include both realism and comedy. During an interview with drama author Jackson R. Bryer in 1994 about how to write comedy, Simon said he would tell aspiring playwrights 'not to try to make it funny. Tell them to try and make it real and then the comedy will come.

'When I was writing plays,' he says, 'I was almost always (with some exceptions) writing a drama that was funny.... I wanted to tell a story about real people.' Simon explains how he manages this combination:

'My view is 'how sad and funny life is.' I can't think of a humorous situation that does not involve some pain. I used to ask, 'What is a funny situation?' Now I ask, 'What is a sad situation and how can I tell it humorously?'

In marriage relationships, his comedies often portray these struggles with plots of marital difficulties or fading love, sometimes leading to separation, divorce and child custody battles. Their endings would typically conclude, after many twists in the plot, to renewal of the relationships.

Politics seldom have any overt role in Simon's stories, and his characters avoid confronting society despite their personal problems. 'Simon is simply interested in showing human beings as they are—with their foibles, eccentricities, and absurdities.' Drama critic Richard Eder explains:

'Simon's popularity rests upon his fine control of a very particular kind of painful comedy. It consists of his characters saying and doing funny things in ludicrous contrast to the unhappiness they are feeling.'

Simon's plays are generally semi-autobiographical, often portraying aspects of his troubled childhood and first marriages. According to Koprince, Simon's plays also 'invariably depict the plight of white middle-class Americans, most of whom are New Yorkers and many of whom are Jewish, like himself.' He states, 'I suppose you could practically trace my life through my plays.' In plays such as *Lost in Yonkers*, Simon suggests the necessity of a loving marriage, opposite to that of his parents', and when children are deprived of it in their home, 'they end up emotionally damaged and lost.'

Koprince points out that 'One of the most important influences on Simon is his Jewish heritage,' although he is unaware of that quality while writing. In the Brighton Beach trilogy, she explains, the lead character is a 'master of self-deprecating humor, cleverly poking fun at himself and at his Jewish culture as a whole.' Simon himself has described his characters as 'often self-deprecating and [who] usually see life from the grimmest point of view.' This theme in writing, notes Koprince, 'belongs to a tradition of Jewish humor....a tradition which values laughter as a defense mechanism and which sees humor as a healing, life-giving force.'

Characters

Simon's characters are typically portrayed as 'imperfect, unheroic figures who are at heart decent human beings,' according to Koprince, and she traces Simon's style of comedy to that of Menander, a playwright of ancient Greece. Menander, like Simon, also used average people in domestic life settings, the stories also blending humor and tragedy into his themes. Many of Simon's most memorable plays, notes Konas, "have been built around two-character scenes," as in segments of *California Suite* and *Plaza Suite*.

Before writing, Simon tries to create an image of his characters. He says that the play, *Star Spangled Girl* which was a box-office failure, was 'the only play I ever wrote where I did not have a clear visual image of the characters in my mind as I sat down at the typewriter.' Simon considers 'character building' as an obligation, stating that the 'trick is to do it skillfully.' Partly because of that skill, Johnson states that "other writers have created vivid characters—but not in the sheer abundance Simon has," adding that "Simon has no peers among contemporary comedy playwrights." Of his characters, McGovern notes that although they are at times exaggerated for the stage, 'they are usually amusing the audience with sparkling 'zingers,' which are also 'very believable' due to Simon's 'facility with dialogue.' She states that 'he reproduces speech so adroitly,' his characters are usually plausible and easy for audiences to identify with and laugh at.

Simon's characters also express many 'serious and continuing concerns of mankind...rather than purely topical material,' which are more transitory. McGovern goes on to observe that his characters are always impatient 'with phoniness, with shallowness, with amorality,' adding that they sometimes express 'implicit and explicit criticism of modern urban life with its stress, its vacuity, and its materialism' However, observes Johnson, 'no Simon hero or heroine makes the ultimate Romantic gesture of thumbing his or her nose at society.'

Style and subject matter

The key aspect most consistent in Simon's writing style is comedy, effectively using both situational and verbal humor. Koprince writes, "his plays are often brilliantly funny,' adding that his 'flair for rapid-fire jokes and wisecracks is unparalleled.' McGovern adds that Simon's comic form 'provides a means to present serious subjects so that audiences may laugh to avoid weeping.'

Johnson notes that 'variety' is one of the main characteristics of Simon's plays, despite the fact that they are all set in urban environments. He accomplishes this by using 'sophisticated, urban humor,' says editor Kimball King, resulting in plays that are 'documents of Middle American experience.' Simon uses everyday 'conflicts,' most of them "deceptively simple,' in his stories, writes Konas, adding, 'behind the comic premise lurks a real problem that needs to be solved.'

Another feature of his writing, appreciated by audiences more during 'periods of cultural change,' is his "adherence to traditional values, specifically those relating to marriage and the family unit." McGovern, likewise states that this same 'thread runs through that Simon's work,' which he feels is necessary to give stability to society: Simon "implies that the monogamous family unit is of paramount importance and should be preserved if at all possible.' Some critics have seen his stories as somewhat 'old fashioned,' writing about them in a negative light, although Johnson points out that 'most members of the audience, however, are delighted to find Simon upholding their own beliefs.' Johnson notes that where infidelity is the theme in a Simon play, 'rarely, if ever, do those who pursue sexual infidelity gain happiness,' observing that 'in Simon's eyes, divorce is never a victory,' and does not bring the characters happiness.

Most of Simon's plays demonstrate his ability to combine both comedy and drama, demonstrating a versatile style of writing. In *Barefoot in the Park*, for example, he was able to 'master light romantic comedy.' Portions of *Plaza Suite* were written as 'farce', for example, and portions of *California Suite* are described as 'high comedy.'

Simon was willing to experiment and take risks, often moving his plays in new and unexpected directions. In *The Gingerbread Lady*, he combines comedy with tragedy; *Rumors* (1988) was a full-length farce; in *Jake's Women* and *Brighton Beach Memoirs* he uses dramatic narration; in *The Good Doctor*, he created a 'pastiche of sketches' around various stories by Chekhov; and *Fools* (1981), was written as a fairy-tale romance similar to stories by Sholem Aleichem. Although some of these efforts failed to win approval by many critics, Koprince claims that they nonetheless 'demonstrate Simon's seriousness as a playwright and his interest in breaking new ground.'

Critical response

For most of his career Simon's work has received mixed reviews, with many critics admiring his comedy skills, much of it a blend of 'humor and pathos'. Other critics were less complimentary, noting that much of his dramatic structure was weak and sometimes relied too heavily on gags and one-liners. As a result, notes Koprince, 'literary scholars had generally ignored Simon's early work, regarding him as a commercially successful playwright rather than a serious dramatist.' Clive Barnes, theater critic for the *New York Times*, wrote that like his British counterpart, Noël Coward, Simon was "destined to spend most of his career underestimated, 'but nonetheless very 'popular.'

This attitude changed after 1991, when he won a Pulitzer Prize for drama with *Lost in Yonkers*. McGovern writes that

'seldom has even the most astute critic recognized what depths really exist in the plays of Neil Simon.' Although, when ***Lost in Yonkers*** was considered by the Pulitzer Advisory Board, board member Douglas Watt noted that it was the only play nominated by all five jury members, and that they judged it 'a mature work by an enduring (and often undervalued) American playwright.'

McGovern compares Simon with noted earlier playwrights, including Ben Jonson, Molière, and George Bernard Shaw, pointing out that those playwrights had 'successfully raised fundamental and sometimes tragic issues of universal and therefore enduring interest without eschewing the comic mode.' She concludes, 'It is my firm conviction that Neil Simon should be considered a member of this company ... an invitation long overdue.' McGovern attempts to explain the response of many critics:

' Above all, his plays which may appear simple to those who never look beyond the fact that they are amusing are, in fact, frequently more perceptive and revealing of the human condition than many plays labeled complex dramas.'

Similarly, literary critic Robert Johnson explains that 'Simon has, in fact, created a rich variety of entertaining, memorable characters who tell us much about the human experience. Simon's work also explores a larger number of serious themes and points of view than he is credited with presenting, using 'quite varied stylistic formats.' As a result, he writes, 'Simon's characters are not only lifelike, but more complicated and more interesting than most characters populating successful stage and screen comedies,' and 'Simon has not received as much critical attention as he deserves.'

Other writers are more assertive in their appreciation of Simon's work, including Lawrence Grobel, who calls him 'the Shakespeare of his time,' and possibly the 'most successful playwright in history.' He states:

'Simon] towers like a Colossus over the American Theater. When Neil Simon's time comes to be judged among successful playwrights of the twentieth century, he will definitely be first among equals. No other playwright in history has had the run he has: fifteen 'Best Plays' of their season ...'

Broadway critic Walter Kerr tries to rationalize why Simon's work has been underrated:

'Because Americans have always tended to underrate writers who make them laugh, Neil Simon's accomplishment have not gained as much serious critical praise as they deserve. His best comedies contain not only a host of funny lines, but numerous memorable characters and an incisively dramatized set of beliefs that are not without merit. Simon is, in fact, one of the finest writers of comedy in American literary history.;

Personal life

Simon has been married five times, to dancer Joan Baim (1953–1973), actress Marsha Mason (1973–1981), twice to Diane Lander (1987–1988 and 1990–1998), and currently actress Elaine Joyce. He is the father of Nancy and Ellen, from his first marriage, and Bryn, Lander's daughter from a previous relationship whom he adopted.

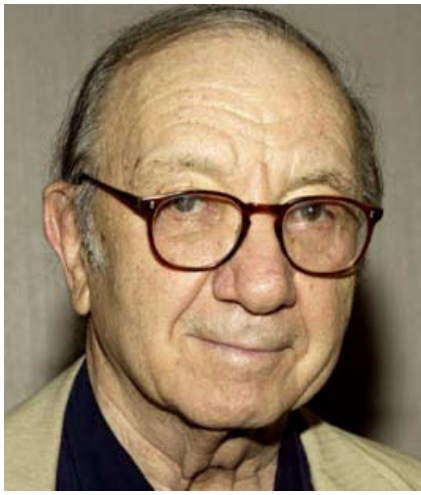
Simon is on the Board of Selectors of Jefferson Awards for Public Service.

Honors and recognition

Simon has been conferred with two honoris causa degrees; a Doctor of Humane Letters from Hofstra University and a Doctor of Laws from Williams College.] In 1983 Simon became the only living playwright to have a New York theatre named after him The legitimate Broadway theater the Neil Simon Theatre, formerly the Alvin Theatre, was named in his honor, and he is an honorary member of the Walnut Street Theatre's board of trustees.

In 1965 he won the Tony Award for Best Playwright (***The Odd Couple***), and in 1975, a special Tony Award for his overall contribution to the American theater. For ***Brighton Beach Memoirs*** (1983) he was awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, followed by another Tony Award for Best Play of 1985, ***Biloxi Blues***. In 1991 he won the Pulitzer Prize along with the Tony Award for ***Lost in Yonkers*** (1991)."

--Wikipedia



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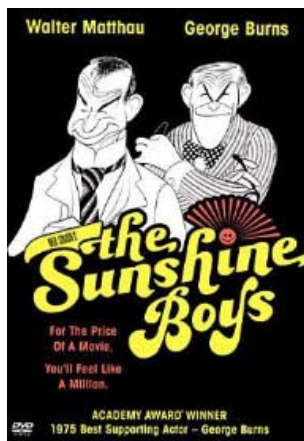
"A soon-to-be-unemployed executive visits the country to avoid a nervous breakdown. Unfortunately, the dark cloud of tribulation seems to follow him in this comic nightmare."

The Sunshine Boys

"Two feuding vaudeville comedians who toured the country for 43 years as The Sunshine Boys are reunited after years apart to make a television commercial."

Sweet Charity

"A lovelorn New York dance hall hostess named Charity Hope Valentine dreams of old-fashioned romance but falls in love with one undeserving man after another."



(Warner Bros. Home Video)

--Plot summaries all taken from WorldCat.

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What Was Vaudeville?

"Vaudeville was a theatrical genre of variety entertainment popular in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. Each performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill. Types of acts included popular and classical musicians, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, illustrated songs, jugglers, one-act plays or scenes from plays, athletes, lecturing celebrities, minstrels, and movies. A vaudeville performer is often referred to as a vaudevillian.

Vaudeville developed from many sources, including the concert saloon, minstrelsy, freak shows, dime museums, and literary burlesque. Called 'the heart of American show business,' vaudeville was one of the most popular types of entertainment in North America for several decades.

Etymology

The origin of this term is obscure, but is often explained as being derived from the expression voix de ville which means 'voice of the city' or 'songs of the town.' A second speculation is that it comes from the fifteenth-century songs on satire by Olivier Basselin, 'Vaux de Vire.' [Another plausible etymology finds origins in the French Vau de Vire, a valley in Normandy noted for its style of satirical songs with topical themes.] The term vaudeville, referring specifically to North American variety entertainment, came into common usage after 1871, with the formation of Sargent's Great Vaudeville Company of Louisville, Kentucky. It had little, if anything, to do with the Comédie en vaudeville of the French theatre.

Leavitt's and Sargent's shows differed little from the coarser material presented in earlier itinerant entertainments, although their use of the term to provide a veneer of respectability points to an early effort to cater variety amusements to the growing middle class. Though vaudeville had been used in the US as early as the 1830s, most variety theatres adopted the term in the late 1880s and early 1890s for two reasons. First, seeking middle class patrons, they wished to distance themselves from the earlier rowdy, working-class variety halls. Second, the French or pseudo-French term lent an air of sophistication, and perhaps made the institution seem more consistent with the Progressive Era's interests in education and self-betterment. Some, however, preferred the earlier term 'variety' to what manager Tony Pastor called its 'sissy and Frenchified' successor. Thus, vaudeville was marketed as "variety" well into the 20th century.

Beginnings

A descendant of variety, (c. 1860s–1881), vaudeville was distinguished from the earlier form by its mixed-gender audience, usually alcohol-free halls, and often slavish devotion to inculcating favor among members of the middle class. The form gradually evolved from the concert saloon and variety hall into its mature form throughout the 1870s and 1880s. This more genteel form was known as 'Polite Vaudeville.'

In the years before the American Civil War, entertainment existed on a different scale. Certainly, variety theatre existed before 1860 in Europe and elsewhere. In the US, as early as the first decades of the 19th century, theatregoers could enjoy a performance consisting of Shakespeare plays, acrobatics, singing, dancing, and comedy. As the years progressed, people seeking diversified amusement found an increasing number of ways to be entertained. Vaudeville was characterized by traveling companies touring through cities and towns. A handful of circuses regularly toured the country; dime museums appealed to the curious; amusement parks, riverboats, and town halls often featured 'cleaner' presentations of variety entertainment; and saloons, music halls and burlesque houses catered to those with a taste for the risqué. In the 1840s, the minstrel show, another type of variety performance, and 'the first emanation of a pervasive and purely American mass culture,' grew to enormous popularity and formed what Nick Tosches called 'the heart of 19th-century show business.' A significant influence also came from Dutch minstrels and comedians. Medicine shows traveled the countryside offering programs of comedy, music, jugglers and other novelties along with displays of tonics, salves, and miracle elixirs, while 'Wild West' shows provided romantic vistas of the disappearing frontier, complete with trick riding, music and drama. Vaudeville incorporated these various itinerant amusements into a stable, institutionalized form centered in America's growing urban hubs.

In the early 1880s, impresario Tony Pastor, a circus ringmaster turned theatre manager, capitalized on middle class sensibilities and spending power when he began to feature "polite" variety programs in several of his New York City theatres. The usual date given for the 'birth' of vaudeville is October 24, 1881 at New York's Fourteenth Street Theater, when Pastor famously staged the first bill of self-proclaimed 'clean' vaudeville in New York City.[2] Hoping to draw a potential audience from female and family-based shopping traffic uptown, Pastor barred the sale of liquor in his theatres, eliminated bawdy material from his shows, and offered gifts of coal and hams to attendees. Pastor's experiment proved

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successful, and other managers soon followed suit.

Popularity

B. F. Keith took the next step, starting in Boston, where he built an empire of theatres and brought vaudeville to the US and Canada. Later, E. F. Albee, adoptive grandfather of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee, managed the chain to its greatest success. Circuits such as those managed by Keith-Albee provided vaudeville's greatest economic innovation and the principal source of its industrial strength. They enabled a chain of allied vaudeville houses that remedied the chaos of the single-theatre booking system by contracting acts for regional and national tours. These could easily be lengthened from a few weeks to two years.

Albee also gave national prominence to vaudeville's trumpeting 'polite' entertainment, a commitment to entertainment equally inoffensive to men, women and children. Acts that violated this ethos (e.g., those that used words such as 'hell') were admonished and threatened with expulsion from the week's remaining performances or were canceled altogether. In spite of such threats, performers routinely flouted this censorship, often to the delight of the very audience members whose sensibilities were supposedly endangered. He eventually instituted a set of guidelines to be an audience member at his show, and these were reinforced by the ushers working in the theater.

This 'polite entertainment' also extended to Keith's company members. He went to extreme measures to maintain this level of modesty. Keith even went as far as posting warnings backstage such as this: 'Don't say 'slob' or 'son of a gun' or 'hully gee' on the stage unless you want to be canceled peremptorily...if you are guilty of uttering anything sacrilegious or even suggestive you will be immediately closed and will never again be allowed in a theater where Mr. Keith is in authority.' Along these same lines of discipline, Keith's theater managers would occasionally send out blue envelopes with orders to omit certain suggestive lines of songs and possible substitutions for those words. If actors chose to ignore these orders or quit, they would get "a black mark" on their name and would never again be allowed to work on the Keith Circuit. Thus, actors learned to follow the instructions given them by B.F. Keith for fear of losing their careers forever.

By the late 1890s, vaudeville had large circuits, houses (small and large) in almost every sizable location, standardized booking, broad pools of skilled acts, and a loyal national following. One of the biggest circuits was Martin Beck's Orpheum Circuit. It incorporated in 1919 and brought together 45 vaudeville theaters in 36 cities throughout the US and Canada and a large interest in two vaudeville circuits. Another major circuit was that of Alexander Pantages. At his hey-day Pantages owned more than 30 vaudeville theaters and controlled, through management contracts, perhaps 60 more in both the US and Canada.

At its height, vaudeville played across multiple strata of economic class and auditorium size. On the vaudeville circuit, it was said that if an act would succeed in Peoria, Illinois, it would work anywhere. The question 'Will it play in Peoria?' has now become a metaphor for whether something appeals to the American mainstream public. The three most common levels were the "small time" (lower-paying contracts for more frequent performances in rougher, often converted theatres), the 'medium time' (moderate wages for two performances each day in purpose-built theatres), and the 'big time' (possible remuneration of several thousand dollars per week in large, urban theatres largely patronized by the middle and upper-middle classes). As performers rose in renown and established regional and national followings, they worked their way into the less arduous working conditions and better pay of the big time. The capitol of the big time was New York City's Palace Theatre (or just 'The Palace' in the slang of vaudevillians), built by Martin Beck in 1913 and operated by Keith. Featuring a bill stocked with inventive novelty acts, national celebrities, and acknowledged masters of vaudeville performance (such as comedian and trick roper Will Rogers), the Palace provided what many vaudevillians considered the apotheosis of remarkable careers. A standard show bill would begin with a sketch, follow with a single – an individual male or female performer, next would be an alley oop – an acrobatic act, then another single, followed by yet another sketch such as a blackface comedy. The acts that followed these for the rest of the show would vary from musicals to jugglers to song and dance singles and end with a final extravaganza – either musical or drama – with the full company. These shows would feature such stars as Eubie Blake – a piano player, the famous and magical Harry Houdini and child star, Baby Rose Marie, adds Gilbert. In the *New York Tribune's* article about Vaudeville, it is said that at any given time, Vaudeville was employing over twelve thousand different people throughout its entire industry. Each entertainer would be on the road 42 weeks at a time while working a particular 'Circuit' – or an individual theatre chain of a major company

While the neighborhood character of vaudeville attendance had always promoted a tendency to tailor fare to specific audiences, mature vaudeville grew to feature houses and circuits specifically aimed at certain demographic groups. Black patrons, often segregated into the rear of the second gallery in white-oriented theatres, had their own smaller circuits, as did speakers of Italian and Yiddish. This foreign addition combined with comedy produced such acts as 'minstrel shows of antebellum America' and Yiddish theater. PBS adds that many of these ethnic families joined in on this entertainment business, and for them, this traveling lifestyle was simply a continuation of the adventures that brought them to America. Through these acts, they were able to assimilate themselves into their new home while also bringing bits of their own culture into this new world. White-oriented regional circuits, such as New England's 'Peanut Circuit', also provided essential training grounds for new artists while allowing established acts to experiment with and polish new material. At its height, vaudeville was rivaled only by churches and public schools among the nation's premiere public gathering places.

Another slightly different aspect of Vaudeville was an increasing intrigue with the female figure. The previously mentioned ominous idea of 'the blue envelopes' led to the phrase 'blue' material, which described the provocative subject matter present in many Vaudeville acts of the time.] Many managers even saw this scandalous material as a marketing strategy to attract many different audiences. As stated in Andrew Erdman's book *Blue Vaudeville*, the Vaudeville stage was even marked with descriptions like, 'a highly sexualized space...where unclad bodies, provocative dancers, and singers of 'blue' lyrics all vied for attention.' Such performances highlighted and objectified the female body as a 'sexual delight,' a phenomenon that historians believe emerged in the mid-19th century. But more than that, these historians think that Vaudeville marked a time in which the female body became its own 'sexual spectacle' more than it ever had before. This sexual image began sprouting everywhere an American went: the shops, a restaurant, the grocery store, etc. The more this image brought in the highest revenue, the more Vaudeville focused on acts involving women. Even acts that were as

innocent as a sister act were higher sellers than a good brother act. Consequently, Erdman adds that female Vaudeville performers such as Julie Mackey and Gibson's Bathing Girls began to focus less on talent and more on physical appeal through their figure, tight gowns, and other revealing attire. It eventually came as a surprise to audience members when such beautiful women actually possessed talent in addition to their appealing looks. This element of surprise colored much of the reaction to the female entertainment of this time.

Decline

The continued growth of the lower-priced cinema in the early 1910s dealt the heaviest blow to vaudeville. This was similar to the advent of free broadcast television's diminishing the cultural and economic strength of the cinema. Cinema was first regularly commercially presented in the US in vaudeville halls. The first public showing of movies projected on a screen took place at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in 1896. Lured by greater salaries and less arduous working conditions, many performers and personalities, such as Al Jolson, W. C. Fields, Mae West, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Jimmy Durante, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Edgar Bergen, Fanny Brice, Burns and Allen, and Eddie Cantor, used the prominence gained in live variety performance to vault into the new medium of cinema. In so doing, such performers often exhausted in a few moments of screen time the novelty of an act that might have kept them on tour for several years. Other performers who entered in vaudeville's later years, including Jack Benny, Abbott and Costello, Kate Smith, Cary Grant, Bob Hope, Milton Berle, Judy Garland, Rose Marie, Sammy Davis, Jr., Red Skelton, and The Three Stooges, used vaudeville only as a launching pad for later careers. They left live performance before achieving the national celebrity of earlier vaudeville stars, and found fame in new venues.

The line between live and filmed performances was blurred by the number of vaudeville entrepreneurs who made more or less successful forays into the movie business. For example, Alexander Pantages quickly realized the importance of motion pictures as a form of entertainment. He incorporated them in his shows as early as 1902. Later, he entered into partnership with the Famous Players-Lasky, a major Hollywood production company and an affiliate of Paramount Pictures.

By the late 1920s, almost no vaudeville bill failed to include a healthy selection of cinema. Earlier in the century, many vaudevillians, cognizant of the threat represented by cinema, held out hope that the silent nature of the 'flickering shadow sweethearts' would preclude their usurpation of the paramount place in the public's affection. With the introduction of talking pictures in 1926, the burgeoning film studios removed what had remained the chief difference in favor of live theatrical performance: spoken dialogue. Historian John Kenrick wrote:

'Top vaudeville stars filmed their acts for one-time pay-offs, inadvertently helping to speed the death of vaudeville. After all, when 'small time' theatres could offer 'big time' performers on screen at a nickel a seat, who could ask audiences to pay higher amounts for less impressive live talent? The newly-formed RKO studios took over the famed Orpheum vaudeville circuit and swiftly turned it into a chain of full-time movie theaters. The half-century tradition of vaudeville was effectively wiped out within less than four years.'

Inevitably, managers further trimmed costs by eliminating the last of the live performances. Vaudeville also suffered due to the rise of broadcast radio following the greater availability of inexpensive receiver sets later in the decade. Even the hardest in the vaudeville industry realized the form was in decline; the perceptive understood the condition to be terminal. The standardized film distribution and talking pictures of the 1930s confirmed the end of vaudeville. By 1930, the vast majority of formerly live theatres had been wired for sound, and none of the major studios was producing silent pictures. For a time, the most luxurious theatres continued to offer live entertainment, but most theatres were forced by the Great Depression to economize.

Some in the industry blamed cinema's drain of talent from the vaudeville circuits for the medium's demise. Others argued that vaudeville had allowed its performances to become too familiar to its famously loyal, now seemingly fickle audiences.

There was no abrupt end to vaudeville, though the form was clearly sagging by the late 1920s. The shift of New York City's Palace Theatre, vaudeville's epicenter, to an exclusively cinema presentation on November 16, 1932 is often considered to have been the death knell of vaudeville. No single event is more reflective of its gradual withering.

Though talk of its resurrection was heard during the 1930s and later, the demise of the supporting apparatus of the circuits and the higher cost of live performance made any large-scale renewal of vaudeville unrealistic.

Some of the most prominent vaudevillians continued the migration to cinema, though others found that the gifts that had so delighted live audiences did not translate well into different media. Some performers such as Bert Lahr fashioned careers out of combining live performance, radio and film roles. Many others later appeared in the Catskill resorts that constituted the 'Borscht Belt'. Many simply retired from performance and entered the workaday world of the middle class, the group that vaudeville, more than anything else, had helped to articulate and entertain.

Yet vaudeville, both in its methods and ruling aesthetic, influenced the succeeding media of film, radio, and television. The screwball comedies of the 1930s, those reflections of the brief moment of cinematic equipoise between dialogue and physicality, reflect the more madcap comedic elements of some vaudeville acts (e.g., The Three Keatons). The arsenal of the vaudeville tradition was reused in the preeminent prime-time radio variety shows, like *The Rudy Vallee Show*.] From the structure of vaudeville, with a comic host doing a monologue and introducing a series of acts, originated highly successful television shows, from Milton Berle in 1948 to David Letterman's late night show of the 1980s.] The multi-act format had renewed success in shows such as *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar and, *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Today, performers such as Bill Irwin, a MacArthur Fellow and Tony Award-winning actor, are frequently lauded as being 'New Vaudevillians.'

References to vaudeville and the use of its distinctive argot continue throughout Western popular culture. Terms such as 'a flop' (an act that does badly), for example, have entered the American idiom. Many of the most common performance techniques and "gags" of vaudeville entertainers are still seen on television and on film. Vaudeville, like its dime museum and variety theatre forebears, also continued and solidified a strong American absorption with foreign entertainers.'



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The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville

"From the mid-1800s to the early 1930s, vaudeville existed as a dominant form of entertainment. Here,[the author] includes biographies, songs, and subjects that give the reader a full concept of this once-important recreation. The theaters and towns where vaudeville was performed are also covered in the readable text. The mostly referenced entries run from only a few lines to three pages and are followed by a resource list. Names are given in alphabetical order by last name, but, with first names preceding last names in the text, some readers may be confused. Still, this much-needed update will be a valuable addition to most libraries, given the breadth of its coverage.;" -- **Library Journal**

Neil Simon: A Critical Study

"[This is] a paean of praise, comparing Simon to Moliere, Shaw, and, less improbably, Feydeau. What few discerning comments appear are vitiated by McGovern's heavy-handed style, sententious comments, and general need to make of Simon a 'serious' writer rather than a very skillful popular entertainer. Where the book is useful is in its summaries of his 13 plays and in its photographs of scenes from them. . . . For these materials and a pleasant, unassuming 'Notes from the playwright' by Simon, it should prove useful, especially to undergraduate libraries." -- **Choice**

The Play Goes On: A Memoir

"Just as I never plan what play or film I might write next, I don't plan on what I will write next in these memoirs," says Simon. Well, Neil, it certainly shows. Readers plodding through this second self-portrait will find it hard to believe that this is the same person who wrote **The Odd Couple** and **The Sunshine Boys**. While Simon's stage dialog crackles with wit, his first-person narrative voice is as flat as the paper it's written on. This book picks up where his first memoir, **Rewrites**, concluded; here Simon provides a laundry list of his mid-life achievements, from winning a Pulitzer Prize to marrying and divorcing women in less time than it takes most guys to wear out a pair of sneakers. The book's most interesting moments come when Simon talks about the creative act of writing—which isn't very often." -- **Library Journal**

Understanding Neil Simon

"Koprince (English, U. of North Dakota at Grand Forks) seeks to grant the prolific and popular playwright a measure of the serious literary attention that has passed his work by. She analyzes 16 of Simon's comedies beginning with his first Broadway effort, **Come Blow Your Horn** (1961) and ending with **Laughter On the 23rd Floor** (1993). Koprince emphasizes Simon's versatility, craftsmanship, and willingness to experiment with the comedic form as well as the fundamentally serious nature of his plays...." -- **Book News**

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