



The Collected Plays, Vol. 2

Neil Simon

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And they can't take away the pleasure that Neil Simon's plays have given literally millions of theatergoers in the past quarter of a century. They and the critics agree that a trip to see any one of this master of comedy's stage triumphs ranks among the most wonderful experiences that the American theater offers. The eight plays in this, the second volume of The Collected Plays of Neil Simon, bear eloquent witness to the unique genius of this master playwright who so magnificently blends the joy of laughter and the love of life.

The Collected Plays, Vol. 2 Details

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From Reader Review The Collected Plays, Vol. 2 for online ebook

Greg Kerestan says

Neil Simon is nothing if not diverse- this second collection of plays contains one genuine Simon classic, "The Sunshine Boys," the musical/sketch-comedy hybrid "Little Me," and then such oddities as dark Biblical-update comedy "God's Favorite," the Chekov-by-way-of-Monty-Python revue "The Good Doctor," and a series of dramedies such as "Chapter Two," "California Suite" and "The Gingerbread Lady." If you're a fan of the hits, look for Volume 1. If, like me, you enjoy Simon at his less mainstream moments, this volume should suit you fine.

Cheryl Mealy says

Loved it, of course. It's Neil Simon at his best. Each volume of his collected plays contains hilarious, sad, human and thought-provoking situations and dialogue. I'm happy to read his plays (out loud) as I write my own stage plays, after having seen the film versions of many of his. Reading dialogue is fun for me as it opens my thought processes to allow a director's ideas in, based on the written word and to conclude that each person taking up the pen, pencil (like Hemingway) or laptop hears and sees his or her own vision of each story as it's crafted into words on a page. I give the collection a huge thumbs up. Wish I could have had a conversation with Neil.

Aurora says

A laugh a minute - plus heart. Wonderfully entertaining.

Bianca says

I really enjoyed "Chapter Two" and "The Sunshine Boys." Other than that, they were crap.

Ian Banks says

Hilarious collection of plays. I've seen a lot less of Mr Simon's plays than I should have but what we get here is a range of his work mostly from the 1970s. What's interesting is that, although they are mostly common in theme, they tell a wide variety of stories in a blend of genres and settings. And, most interestingly, many of his plays only have a few characters, which narrows (though not hinders) his focus a lot to the benefit of the story and is probably great for thrifty producers.

There are 8 plays in this collection. I enjoyed all of them but some were far superior to others. I'd probably watch all of them if they were being shown and there were a couple that I was directing in my head. My favourites were God's Favourite, Chapter Two and The Sunshine Boys as they made me laugh out loud and

read out scenes in different voices to make them even funnier than they appeared on stage. They were also great stories. I didn't enjoy Little Me as much because of its sketch-like scenes that didn't feel very much like the parody it clearly was (it felt a lot smarter than it wanted to be, which is no bad thing). Prisoner Of Second Avenue felt like a retread of ideas from his script for The Out-of-Towners, while The Gingerbread Lady felt too focused on its message rather than the story it was telling. California Suite was full of great ideas and made me want to know more about the characters, except for the third play which I found overly silly and farcical. Finally, Th Good Doctor had me scratching my head quite a lot and felt more like a collection of ideas rather than a proper story.

But they're all funny and clever with Simon's trademark smartarse characters and hilarious dialogue. However, I was very disappointed with the publisher not printing a *dramatis personae* before each play - it did not take away from my enjoyment of the plays but it was jarring to not see a list of characters before each script. It's a convention of script-reading that I find helps with my perception of the characters and its omission here was irritating but probably bothers nobody else but me.

Heather says

You can see one of his plays at the theater, but you 'hear' so much more when you read them. LOVE these plays.

Bruce says

(Again, 3 1/2 stars overall.) 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.

The publication is also a bit of a hodgepodge as the chronology of works been disrupted (both within and between volumes). The musicals of the '60s are the most buttered out among the three books (*Sweet Charity*, for example, will not be encountered until the third volume)... not sure why that is... perhaps it took longer to clear the rights to the lyrics, perhaps as better-known works the publisher was hoping to spread out the 'hits' so to speak, or perhaps there was some other reason... or no reason at all. All this is worth noting, though, 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.

Little Me - 3 stars, all for the book, as there's nothing in the music to elevate this trivial musical spoofing rags-to-riches biographies. It's high-camp silliness, charting the forbidden love in the lives of buxom Belle (the narrator) and high-born Noble that aspires (but fails to achieve) the "Aw, shucks" satire of *Lil Abner*.

The Gingerbread Lady - 2 stars; This was Neil Simon's first foray into "serious" theater (a sure sign of an insecure artist letting the critics nag into his native aesthetic), and which arguably anticipates the personality complexes on parade in the Pulitzer-winning *Lost in Yonkers* (which I cover in my review of Volume 4). In any case, here we have a dramedy about a middle-aged actress/has been's re-emergence from alcoholic rehab to her trio of devoted, troubled friends... and daughter. The problem here (fixed largely, but not entirely in *Yonkers*) is that despite colorful and clearly-drawn characters and typically breezy dialogue, the plot meanders without evidencing clear dramatic or character arcs. Among the aimless filler are extended sequences involving a grocery delivery "boy." The protagonist is an unreformed/unreformable lush (think Rosemary Clooney) whose sole achievement by play's end is to impulsively recant on an earlier decision to evict her daughter back to the custody of her father. The ending fails because of its apparent insincerity. For how long will this last? And why should we care? Which brings us to...

The Prisoner of Second Avenue - 1 star; this play has its adherents, but I regard it as the nadir of Simon's "serious playwright" period, one defined by his predilection for establishing flawed, ranting characters in lieu of conflict. This work probably compares most closely to the Jules Feiffer of *Little Murders* in its style and subject matter as an increasingly surreal story about an unbalanced guy in an unbalanced city. It also includes a gratuitous Polish joke at p. 289, something I can only attribute to an unmastered tic from childhood as it also surfaces for no good reason in *God's Favorite* (below) and *Rumors* (Volume 4). The story is easy to synopsize: the protagonist loses his job and so goes crazy in the first two acts. His wife goes mad in the third. Then it snows.... Irrespective of the performances of whatever staging you may happen to see, what makes this tolerable theater is the fact that the neighbors "upstairs" twice drop a bucket of water on him. Unfortunately, I very much felt that these offstage apartment dwellers weren't so much serving the comedy as they were serving as an audience proxy. What does it say about the quality of a show if the audience wants to throw cold water on its star?

The Sunshine Boys - 5 stars; Al Lewis (Oscar Madison on cranky steroids) and Willie Clark may not survive a reunion a dozen years after a successful 43-year long partnership. Apart from being satisfying on its own merits, this play is a fascinating study on at least two other levels. First, it affords Simon the opportunity to flex the muscles of his substantial wit Oreo-style: as an uproarious situation comedy cookie surrounding the gooey center of an extended vaudevillian sketch (the likes of which had my kids repeatedly reading aloud in hysterics... you can imagine how it came off when performed by Walter Matthau and George Burns). Second, it demonstrates brilliantly how to render an obnoxious jerk sympathetic to the audience – introduce him as the protagonist. Not incidentally, this is the same technique Simon used in *The Odd Couple*, although Lewis here comes across as far less likable.

The Good Doctor - 4 stars; here we have eight Chekhov (or Chekhov-inspired) short story adaptations bookended by autobiographical introductions from a "writer." These are all ostensibly Simon, see, e.g., *The Arrangement*, about a first sexual experience which revisits identical material to be found in *Come Blow Your Horn* (see Volume 1). Notwithstanding a sketch about a put-upon Governess forced to endure the humiliating ordeal of having a miser cheat her "for her own good" (which anticipates as a vignette what will be illustrated in greater detail through the Grandmother of *Lost in Yonkers*), the entirety feels very Monty Pythonesque, who were then enjoying their televised heyday, as witness the sketch about an apprentice dentist's first patient (they each end up praying, the patient to survive the ordeal and the apprentice to not be bitten). But don't just take my word for it. Grab a copy and skip to *The Drowned Man* to enjoy a gentleman haggling with a wharf rat over the price of an impersonated drowning. The whole thing's completely absurd;

here are a few lines from pp. 443-444 by way of example:

"Officer! Officer!..."

"Can I help you, sir?"

"There's a man there behind the docks. There. He's been pestering me all evening. I shouldn't be surprised if he were deranged."

"A lot of bad characters around these docks at night, sir. A gentleman like you shouldn't be wandering around here. What was he pestering you about?"

"Well, I'm warning you, you're going to find this strange. He wanted to charge me three rubles to watch him drown. Can you imagine?"

(The policeman looks at him strangely.)"Strange? ... It's outright thievery. It's not worth more than sixty kopecks. You can get as fine a drowning as you'd want to see and not pay a penny more. Three rubles. What nerve!"

"Officer, you seem to miss the point –"

"There's two brothers on the next pier, for one ruble each they'll give you a double drowning. You have to know how to bargain with these men, sir. Get your money's worth."

"It's not a question of price."

"Three rubles... why the other day, right over there, fourteen men acted out an entire *shipwreck* for three rubles. On a good day, for ten rubles you can get a *whole navy* going down. Yes, sir. Sixty kopecks, that's all *I'd* pay for a good drowning. Stick to your price, sir, and have a nice evening." *(The policeman tips his hat and walks off in the opposite direction.)*

God's Favorite - 2 stars; this is an updated retelling of the story of Job, with a little of *Oh, God!* thrown in for good measure. It's amusing, but the characterizations here are atypically thin (to the extent of a devout fundamentalist as a protagonist who seems incapable of identifying Biblical parallels). This is what happens when you stretch what should have been a mere comedy sketch into a full two act play, replete with (at page 513) another gratuitous, well... "It is my belief that I have been chosen, for reasons unknown to me, out of all the people on the face of the earth – regardless of race, religion, Polish whatever – to test the faith and courage of man in his love and devotion to God." (Emphasis added.) To slightly modify the next line: "Is this something that came in the mail, Neil?" I mean, really, what's with the cheap ethnic slurs?

California Suite - 4 stars; see my review of *Plaza Suite* for my general thoughts about Neil Simon's adoption of the anthology form. This version is the most successful of his three "suites" and also a cut above the comedy sketch collection *The Good Doctor*, reviewed below. Set in a generic hotel near LAX we have:

- A 4-star dramedy in which a divorced couple negotiates custody of their 17 year old daughter. This pits NY versus Hollywood, a literary lioness (think of a cross between Dorothy Parker and Joan Rivers) versus a mensch of a producer (Elliott Gould channeling Merv Griffin);

- A 5-star pair of scenes bookending an offstage Oscars ceremony in which a late middle-aged English couple (a diva and a "proper" gentleman) drunkenly negotiate sex; and
- A 3-star (to read, probably 5-stars to watch) farce in which two former best-friend couples fight following the shared-vacation-from-hell in mounting over-the-top hysteria.

Chapter Two - 5 stars; a widower and a newly-divorced woman find love and comfort in one another. This romantic comedy is extremely poignant, especially when you consider that Simon considered its writing to be therapy. The author describes this play as a farewell to his first wife (and soul mate), who he lost to breast cancer and a determination to keep his promise to her and to his children to try again to fall in love and remarry. This is probably as touching and deft a tale of love and loss as you're going to find.

Thus ends the second volume of Neil Simon's plays. Among other works, Volume Three contains the Brighton Beach trilogy and Volume Four includes *Yonkers*, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, and *Jake's Women*. All of these have in common the fact that they are essentially reminiscences of Simon's youth and early adulthood, subject matter hinted at, but largely avoided by Simon for 20 or more years following *Barefoot in the Park*.

One of the things I've been learning in this Neil Simon play-reading odyssey of mine is that reading the playwright's collected works is akin to enjoying a Rashomon-style biography. There are enough remembered and observed pieces of his life contained within that a full survey would seem to convey a grainy image of the man's experiences as a whole. Now that I'm more than halfway through his published output to date (as of this writing), I am here to report that his existence was pretty banal, a life filled with minor dramas personally monumental, but historically insignificant. It is a testament to his art and his outlook that he found in them such a rich lode to mine.
