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Shared comedic elements of three plays in modern American theater: "Six Degrees of Separation", "I'm Not Rappaport", and "Broadway Bound"

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Shared comedic elements of three plays in modern American theater: "Six Degrees of Separation", "I'm Not Rappaport", and "Broadway Bound"

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1992
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

This thesis examines three successful American comedy plays which were produced within the last decade. The plays include Herb Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport*, which won three Tony awards including best actor and best play for the 1985-86 Broadway season; Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound*, which premiered on Broadway at the Broadhurst Theatre in December of 1986 to strong reviews; and John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* which opened off-Broadway at the Lincoln Center and was named best new play of the 1990-91 season by the New York Drama Critics Circle.

Each of these plays demonstrate both strong comedic and dramatic elements. This thesis analyzes the humorous side of that equation to determine what comic devices are used, and how well the humor serves each play as a whole. A prime factor in this analysis includes a consideration of the comedic style of each playwright and where each was in his career when he wrote his hit comedy.

Letters and questions sent to each of the three playwrights were not returned.
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Woody Allen once said through one of his many alter egos something to the effect that sex without love is a shallow experience, but as shallow experiences go it’s pretty terrific. That is basically how this author feels about humor. No doubt most of us would prefer to be enriched, uplifted, and enlightened while enjoying a humorous book, movie, or stage play. But ultimately we will settle for laughter anywhere we can get it.

The reason the three plays in this thesis were chosen was because each in a unique way evokes strong emotional and intellectual responses beyond mere laughter.

At first plays were considered on the strength of the humor alone. The search included everything from Kaufman and Hart’s *The Man Who Came To Dinner* to Simon’s early hit, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*. Later, works with darker elements were also considered; problem comedies such as Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, or Beckett’s existential *Waiting For Godot*. Included in this search were also more contemporary plays such as Feiffer’s *Knock Knock*, or John Bishop’s lesser known *The Great-Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler*. Although
these are all quite worthy of study for a thesis on comedy, they lacked a connecting link.

The trio of plays ultimately selected had two strong factors in their favor. They were: (1) of recent vintage (and thus had roots in the rich theater tradition and yet embraced issues that are of immediate concern today); and (2) they enjoyed broad commercial and critical success owing to some common universal elements. In addition all three plays were the products of three firmly established American playwrights. The most compelling reasons however were much more subjective and personal.

In *Broadway Bound* I found a kindred soul in the character of Eugene, who as a post World War II baby boomer was a product like myself of a turbulent home, and who sublimates his hostility and frustration into his writing. Guare’s *Six Degrees of Separation* savagely satirizes middle age urbanites in a manner that speaks volumes about an America in crisis today, yet in such a way that also allows us to laugh at our inflated self-importance. And in *I’m Not Rappaport* Gardner seems to be saying that even old age with all it’s miseries and attendant frustrations can still be an opportunity to face life with courage and dignity. Taken as a whole these three respective works speak personally to my shared generation’s past, present, and future. With each play I laughed, but the humor was rich in thought, with mirrors for personal
reflection, and with a shared concern for the frailty of the human condition.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Davey Marlin-Jones for his most enlightening and informative views on the three comedies studied. In over two hours of taped interviews Mr. Marlin-Jones gave a skilled director’s perspective on the trio of plays, especially *Broadway Bound* which he directed on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus in the spring of 1990.

I also appreciate the advice and counsel of Dr. Jeffrey Koep and Dr. Jerry Crawford who have both been most helpful in guiding me through the rigors of a Masters program in Theatre Arts.
CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

The Roots of Comedy

Humor is undoubtedly as old as civilization itself. As soon as individuals began to take themselves too seriously there were others to make light of their vainglorious folly. Perhaps history’s first comic figure was a tribal cave dweller freshly back from a kill, who in reenacting his fearless exploits to his lesser comrades inadvertently bonks himself on the head with a bone. Was such simple dramatic foreplay the mother of laughter? Or did this mysterious guttural eruption of mirth and surprise evolve gradually from grunts and groans, one day emerging as a self-conscious response to man’s comic condition?

According to James Feibleman in his exhaustive study on the history of comedy (1962), the earliest evidence of humor can be found in cave drawings from the Paleolithic era suspected to be caricature (17). There is also evidence dating back to 1000 B.C. of a “papyrus drawing made of a cat with a shepherd’s crook driving a flock of geese” (19). Little else about early comic tradition is known. According to Martin Grotjahn even the Christian bible contains almost nothing in
the way of overt humor or any suggestion of its practice as an art form in the early pages of man’s history (1957, 25-7).

The genesis of humor on stage is no less shrouded in mystery and speculation. Aristotle, in the Poetics attributed the infancy of theatrical comedy to phallic songs and fertility rites (Nelson 1990, 38). In fact the word comedy itself derives from the rite of Comus, a Greek fertility god celebrated in festivals of renewal and rebirth (Monahan 1971, 8). Aristotle also suggested that these rites may have evolved into a more formal comedy by troupes of actors who--disdained by public officials--were forced to ply their craft from village to village (Nelson, 38). Yet as Feibleman asserts, “...in primitive times, no separation was made of comedy and tragedy. Comedy may be very old, but the separation of comedy from tragedy...is a comparatively recent occurrence.” Feibleman goes on to state that though comedy and tragedy evolved from the same roots, “Formal comedy was certain to have been a later development than formal tragedy” (18). How fertility festivals and the performances of wayfaring acting troupes eventually progressed to more definitive comic works is unclear. Even more ambiguous is how comedy as an art form evolved in non-Western cultures such as Africa and the Far East.

What we do know is that some very impressive comedies written for the early Greek stage have survived:

[Drama]...is the medium for which the oldest surviving bodies of distinctly comic literature were written. Aristophanes was already writing dramatic comedies in
Athens in the fifth century BC, in competition with other dramatists whose work has not survived (Nelson, 19).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the many divergent paths that comedy took since Aristophanes time. Where applicable, if the historical context of a work of comedy is important to our discussion it will be included.

A Comic Perspective

To proceed from the question, "What makes this particular work funny?" naturally leads to the larger question, "What makes anything funny?" And then suddenly we've opened a most unpleasant can of worms. For although research in this field is extensive there is no drier subject on earth than comic theory. In Plato's *Symposium* for instance, Socrate's ramblings on the topic put even Aristophanes to sleep!

The pool of available research is distressingly fraught with pedantic conjecture, vague definition of terms, unsubstantiated assertions, and worst of all, very little admitted convergence among theorists. Comic theory is also hopelessly intertwined with research on the 'craft' of comedy (which attempts to explain joke technique), confusion between theories that posit humor as originating in the *laugher* as opposed to *what is being laughed at*, and with debates in the dramatic world concerning just what is a comedy anyway. Yet to comprehensively understand a particular case in comedy one cannot ignore theory entirely. One must instead begin to unravel from the larger world of theory and practice those
individual strands that will prove most helpful in arriving at specific answers; one worm at a time.

Let's begin then with a comprehensive definition of comedy, if such a feat is possible. What Aristotle stated on the subject of humor (that we know of), is sparse but quite useful. He first made a clear distinction between comedy and tragedy, which for centuries has been considered the norm:

Tragedy is narrative which concerns persons of high degree, is written in a lofty style, and beginning happily comes to a sad conclusion. Comedy, on the other hand, uses humble and everyday language, and resolves its complications in a fortunate ending. (Feibleman, 53)

Although this perspective of comedy does not hold up particularly well today it is the base from which a multitude of exceptions are compared. As early as the Renaissance, Elizabethan playwrights introduced the “new technique,...of mixing comedy and tragedy in the same plays” (Feibleman, 54). A more modern view takes into account not only the mixing of forms but the intended perception of an audience as well, in that if a dramatic work is comic it must illicit some sort of humorous response:

...in the Middle Ages...harmony and reconciliation rather than wit or hilarity were considered the essence of comedy...
...the modern usage encompasses two concepts, not one. Laughter is the more obvious. (Nelson, 1-2)

Yet the recognition of this fact immediately presents a dilemma. The customary movement towards harmony and an agreeable resolution seems to be at odds with humor that is often “discordant, malicious, or vindictive” as T.G.A. Nelson suggests in his book Comedy (1990, 2-3). Nelson goes on to
propose that this dilemma reaches to the very heart of the paradox that typifies humor:

Indeed the most frustrating, and at the same time most fascinating, aspect of comedy and laughter is their paradoxical nature....Humor may affirm life within society or seek to revolutionize society. (40)

...in As You Like It, and in many other comedies, there is a tension between the forward movement of the plot, which is usually towards marriage, and the backward pull of the dialogue, which ridicules it. (46)

There are no hard and fast rules to be drawn from these contradictions. For the purposes of this study an awareness that they exist is necessary to the analysis which follows.

For now a useful definition would still not be complete without recognition of yet another factor, as addressed by Bergson in his oft-quoted book Laughter (1928):

To understand laughter, we must put it back in its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one....Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification. (reprinted in Johnson, Bierman, and Hart, eds. 1971, 263)

This suggests that although “success, triumph, and marriage are common elements in a happy ending,” as Johnson, Bierman, and Hart propose, “they are not the central elements in a comic resolution” (263). These writers postulate that the socially significant thrust of comedy is not merely in creating happily-ever-afters but rather in reweaving the “threatened social fabric.” Thus comedy may poke fun or even seriously lampoon elements within the social structure, but it is almost always in an attempt to improve that structure, and more importantly to regain a sense of community that may
have been misplaced in the process. In lighter comedies such as *Twelfth Night* there is generally a return to the status quo, with lovers reunited and conflicts abated, everyone wiser for the experience. In darker comedies such as *The Merchant of Venice* the threat to social institutions may be real indeed but with a sense that the threat is meant to reform and not merely condemn. In the end there is still a return to order and a renewal of community spirit, although not all (in *Merchant's* case Shylock) may participate.

Another dimension to the social aspect of comedy is how it relates to us as individuals. Since there is some truth to Bergson's assertion that laughter invokes a "temporary anesthesia of the heart," appealing more to our intellect than our emotions, it is easier for a comedy to satirize universal foibles without immediately arousing our emotional defenses against the notion that the play could be about us personally:

To approach the problem from a different angle, most comedies, whatever their differences, have in common one quality: a critical stance toward the actions and sentiments of their personae, who stand in for us...comic characters are in fact, stand-ins for us: even as our laughter is dying away we are likely, on honest reflection, to recognize the characters' follies as our own. (Johnson, et al., 262)

As J.L. Styan writes, in a "surrealistic comedy like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*...the slapstick convention of the play deceives us most of the time into thinking that we are not looking at ourselves" (Corrigan, ed. 1965, 237).
The fact that comedies do speak to us as individuals within the present points to another unique aspect of humor: its often short duration as a popular piece of art. Certainly there are aspects of the great comedies that speak to all ages, but even in the best of Shakespeare, Chekov, or Shaw so much of the material specifically satirizes a social class or custom of the day, that a great deal of the humor is lost in the translation to a contemporary audience. Harold Watts in his essay, "The Sense of Regain: A Theory of Comedy" (1946), asserts that "comedy never intends to speak across the years; it is a dramatic representation addressed to us" (20). He defends his argument by pointing out that for a comedy to relate to us as individuals it must engender "two immediate pleasures: (1) that of recognition; and (2) that of applying a limited scale of human truth" (20). To do so the characters must speak in our everyday language, they must earn their livings as we do ours, they must in short "lead the kind of lives we lead, or at least the kind of lives led by certain of our acquaintance." In contrast, "the tragic poet reports little or nothing of how people dress and amuse themselves,...these things lie in the province of the comic writer" (20-21). When the tragic events of our lives begin to weigh us down, the power of comedy, writes Watts, "stir[s] in us a sense of return,...a restored 'sense of balance'" but it can only do so in the present tense. "From this" he says, "it is plain that the only comedy for which we can have spontaneous enthusiasm is the comedy of our own day" (23).
Still, not all plays that are considered comic can be conveniently categorized in light of the elements considered thus far. Robert Corrigan in his essay “Comedy and the Comic Spirit” (1965) clarifies the problem rather succinctly when he writes:

Whereas in the comedy of earlier times, comic means were used to comic ends, in the modern theatre comic means are employed to serious ends.

...We see it in the plays of such different writers as Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, and Albee, all of whom use what were once considered comic techniques to serve serious aims. Their belief that life is a grand guignol, but with less sense...employs the ludicrousness of comedy to show that life is itself absurd. (11)

Considering the vast range of works that are deemed comic, and the contradictory elements among the many definitions of comedy, it is no wonder that theorists cannot agree on what a comedy is. If we include Corrigan's analysis in an attempt to arrive at a comprehensive definition (and we should) then we could conceivably conclude that a work qualifies as a comedy if it merely employs comic technique in the telling of its story. Clearly however this would be analogous to enlarging the net and catching all the fish. Even in Shakespeare’s tragedies some very funny moments can be found which utilize wonderfully inventive technique. These works could hardly be classified as comedies.

Rather than attempt to frame a definition that will work in all cases, it is perhaps more important to recognize that categories in drama are only approximate guidelines in order to provide a framework from which to reflect on a work that we have just experienced. As Johnson and company have ob-
served, "tragedy and comedy are not opposed polarities" (262). They are extremes on a continuum not unlike temperature or ranges of velocity. Norman Holland, a psychoanalytic theorist, observed that "comedy is simply tragedy speeded up" (Nelson, 32). Northrup Frye contends that "tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy" and that comedy "contains a potential tragedy within itself" (Johnson, 262). Just as hot and cold are not opposites but are relative to each other at different ends of an arbitrary scale denoting temperature, there are lukewarm regions in literature and drama where the humor is nearly impossible to classify.

For purposes of reference this thesis will consider those elements that apply more fully to the comic end of the dramatic scale. Robert Corrigan in the introduction to his book, Comedy: Meaning and Form (1965) offers an overview of a comedy in the classical sense, as well as putting the definition in a contemporary perspective:

"While it is true there seem to be some characteristics of comedy which can be called 'universal'--the presence of lovers, the defeat of an imposter figure and his subsequent assimilation into the restored social fabric, an inverted Oedipal pattern in which the son triumphs over the father, and the presence of violence without its consequences--these finally have thematic rather than structural significance....The constant in comedy is the comic view of life or the comic spirit: the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep going....the comic sense tries to cope with the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of being." (Corrigan, 3)

To emphasize those components that are useful for the purposes of this study, a comedy may contain: 1) a movement towards harmony and resolution of opposing forces; 2) an
affirmation of, or return to, a sense of community; 3) a social function in which societal institutions, manners, and customs are held up for ridicule and reflection by "us," an audience of individuals in the present day; and 4) comic techniques that evoke amusement and/or laughter, or that are utilized for more serious ends. It is this latter element that we shall examine in "setting the stage" for the analysis of the three comedies to come.

The Craft of Comedy

Part of the difficulty in coming to terms with a definitive vision of humor is the blurred division between comedy as an art form and the comic devices employed to generate laughter in most humorous works. That is not to imply that all comic playwrights are strictly 'going for the laugh.' But writers who are successful in this genre are not achieving them by accident.

The writing of comedy is not only a serious business, it is a highly specialized craft, and behind that craft labors a skilled craftsman. No doubt there exists humor in plays that is unintentional. No doubt a skilled director can bring out humor that wasn't realized by the playwright. The actor can build on that comic potential or detract from it. But for the most part if a play evokes laughter the writer meant it that way. Before dissecting the trio of plays to tap into the rich vein of humor that courses through each of
them, we need to know where to cut, and we need to know something of the craftsman who created them.

The tools of the craftsman are many. The comic techniques that are employed in plays (both comedies and otherwise) are so numerous that to categorize them all would encompass several volumes. A brief sampling of the most common theories behind why various comic techniques work will suffice for our purposes.

Some humorous material can be explained by Bergson’s “the mechanical encrusted on the living” theory (37) which insists that laughter is generated in part when a person acts reflexively, like a machine, thus often acting inappropriately and inadvertently appearing the fool. W.H. Auden borrows from Bergson’s theory to explain why a man slipping on a banana peel is funny. He says such an act represents “A clash between the laws of the inorganic which have no telos and the laws of the organic which do” (Enck, et al. 1960, 110). In other words the man has the ability to watch where he’s going, the banana does not.

Freud in his exhaustive work, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) proposed several theories, many quite incisive; the most enduring is his “theory of psychic release.” This purports that laughter is a safety valve; an unconscious release of repressed and taboo emotional baggage which is triggered when the psyche is tricked by the surprise elements in an incongruous situation, observation, or joke (Wilson, 95). James Feibleman took another tack on the
psychic release model by describing "the arousal...first of terrific fear, then of release, and finally of laughter at the needlessness of the fear" (Nelson, 7). According to Christopher Wilson in his book, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*, (1979) Freud also attempted to classify all the diverse types of individual jokes:

Freud regarded the major techniques of jokes as condensation--in which two ideas are telescoped into a single word or phrase, displacement--in which emphasis is displaced from the relevant to the irrelevant, faulty-reasoning, double-meaning, absurdity, multiple use of the same material, representation by the opposite, indirect representation. (17)

The *incongruity* element Freud emphasizes is the basis for many theories of the same name, proposed most notably by eighteenth century philosophers Schopenhaur and Kant, Scottish poet James Beattie, and enlarged upon by the critic William Hazlitt in the introduction to his book *The English Comic Writers* (1818). Kant stressed the element of surprise in his declaration (1790) that "laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (Paulos, 3). Hazlitt (1819) viewed incongruity as "the disconnecting of one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another" (3), and saw within it a distinction between "what things are and what they ought to be" (Corrigan, 231). The concept of incongruity also encompasses a host of variant meanings including: a reversal of expectations, "jokes that arise from a clash between two rival 'scripts' or realms of meaning" (Nelson, 125), and Koestler's 'Bisociation' theory (1964) which states
that humor results in the perception of an idea "in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of references..." (Wilson, 12). J.L. Styan offers a simple example of incongruity when he writes, "the bookworm is funnier...on a dance-floor than in a library, the flirt funnier and more of a flirt in a library than on a dance floor" (Corrigan, 235).

Seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes proposed yet another explanation of humor in what has come to be known as the "superiority theory." Proponents of this view criticize other theorists such as Bergson because as French writer Marcel Pagnol explains, they "all sought the source of laughter in funny things or situations,...whereas it really lies in the subject who laughs. Laughter always--without exception--betokens a sudden sense of superiority" (Corrigan, 131). Briefly this theory states that laughter is caused when we experience a "sudden exaltation at a triumph of our own or an indignity suffered by someone else" (Nelson, 5). Centuries before, Cicero said that a sense of the ridiculous "rested on a certain meanness and deformity" and that for humor to work it had to be at another's expense (Monahan, 36).

Closely related to the "superiority theory" are variations such as "malice" or "derisive humor" as also elucidated by Freud. These theories basically describe ridicule through "focus[ing] upon a single obsessive dimension of human behavior" evident in many of Aristophanes's plays (Crawford, 154).
"Aristophanes also used animals, birds, and inanimate objects as character types to represent human beings" (154). Nelson writes that "according to Umberto Eco, the comic effect is realized when a rule is violated by 'an ignoble, inferior, and repulsive (animal-like) character'. We feel 'superior to his misbehavior and to his sorrow for having broken the rule...' " (89).

Theorists also offer quite elaborate explanations behind the use of word plays, puns, and witticisms, such as "malapropisms" introduced by Sheridan, "where a word which does not belong in a sentence is substituted accidently for one which does" (Nelson, 128). For example in Sheridan’s The Rivals (1775) Mrs. Malaprop says, "Illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory." Or in another passage she observes, "He is the very pineapple of politeness" (Crawford, 73).

As many writers have pointed out there is a great deal of overlap between the vast assortment of theories. Often a joke or situation itself contains elements of two or more comic techniques. John Allen Paulos in his wonderfully witty book “Mathematics and Humor" (1980) states that "idiot and misunderstanding jokes" are a good example of combining "both superiority and incongruity theories of humor:"

Two idiots, one tall, skinny, and bald, the other short and fat, come out of a tavern. As they start toward home a bird flies over and defecates on the bald man's head. The short man says he's going back to the tavern for toilet paper, whereupon the tall one observes, "No, don't do that. The bird's probably a mile away by now." (3)
Isolate any single theory however and it is easy to punch holes in its assertions. Upon reflection it is a fairly simple task to think of situations that contain the proper ingredients of a surprise, incongruity, exaggeration, feeling of superiority, or derision and yet have nothing funny about them. We may feel superior to a mentally challenged person trying to tie his shoes but this is not necessarily humorous. "Snow in May is incongruous yet has no point" writes Paulos and thus is not funny (9). Paulos explains why one such technique does not always produce humor:

Incongruity by itself is not...a sufficient condition for humor for three reasons: 1) it may not be noticed; 2) it may not have a point or be reasonably resolvable; and 3) the "emotional climate" may not be right.... Together then, two ingredients--a perceived incongruity with a point and an appropriate emotional climate--seem to be both necessary and sufficient for humor.(9)

The writer Max Eastman developed the "derailment" theory of humor which though still a theory, is one of the few that takes into account the "emotional climate" that precedes a joke, character, or humorous idea. His view according to Paulos is that "humorous comments, happenings and so forth, are incongruous not per se, but only given the context in which they occur. The normal flow of things is 'derailed by them' "(6). (Italics mine) J.L. Styan commenting on the same principle writes:

There is considerable discrepancy between the things we find comic in life and those contrived on the stage: a man falling on his face in the street may be an object of pathos, but on the stage an object of derision. There is confusion between the techniques of comedy designed to raise laughter and the use to which the laughter is put:
why should an anticlimax make us happy, or a clown make us sad?

Thus in the proper stage context an inept person not able to tie his shoes could be funny, snow in April or May might be hilarious. The laughter itself might also be a smokescreen for a more serious message.

The problem of analyzing the craft of comedy then through a strictly theoretical basis (besides the fact that a multitude of exceptions can be found for every rule) is that theory by and large ignores the context of the art in which the humor occurs. Thus it becomes a futile exercise in studying the proverbial tree, or rather the leaves on the tree, and missing the forest. As L.C. Knights writes in his essay "Notes on Comedy" (1964), "the greatness of any comedy can only be determined by the inclusiveness, the coherence and stability of the resultant attitude;...abstract theories...can at best only amuse" (Corrigan, 186). Or as he states in regards to Meredith's ideas, "...it [theory] has the ill effect of providing the illusion that we know all that is necessary about a comedy when we know very little" (182).

There are recent theorists, albeit very few, who take a more comprehensive or "Gestalt" approach to the problem of understanding humor. In his book The Theory of Comedy (1968) Elder Olson enlarges on the idea that humor does not exist in a vacuum but rather thrives only when the proper "emotional climate" of which Paulos referred is achieved. He uses the term "laughter emotion" to describe the entire range of humorous response and writes that it occurs "only upon a con-
currence of three factors, ...(1) a certain kind of object, 
(2) a certain frame of mind in us, [and] (3) the grounds in
which we feel" (Olson, 12). He elaborates on this by point-
ing out that we don’t laugh at everything that is potentially
funny just as we don’t fear everyone or every situation.
Laughter or fear are responses that depend on our predisposi-
tion to the object of the humor/fear and the circumstance in
which it occurs.

It is the context of a character, funny line or plot
device, (i.e. the emotional climate) within a play that is of
interest here. For in a play there is actually a dual
emotional climate: that of the action on stage and that of
the audience. Pantomime for instance would not go over very
well in an audience of blind people, no matter how hilarious
the mime. Writer/director Davey Marlin-Jones comments on the
role of the audience:

The audience must participate. You cannot observe comedy
and have the laughter served to you. You’ve got to fill
in gaps. And I think that’s the final test of any good
theater; that it’s a play that cannot live without us
because it’s not a play until we fill in, until we
participate, until we see the difference between what is
being said and what is really transpiring.
(Interview 1992)

It is this environment then of both actors and audience
that determines to a large part how the humor will be
perceived and how well the comic effect serves the play as a
whole. As Benjamin Lehmann in his book Comedy and Laughter
(1954) writes:

...we must observe that though we laugh at actions and
utterances in comedy, we do not laugh at the comedy as a
whole. For the comedy as a whole is a serious work, making an affirmation about life... (82)

From the playwright's perspective then, what is the climate that is most conducive to humor? And as students of theater what do we look for in assessing a work so that we may benefit as artists? Marlin-Jones offers this advice as a starting point:

Instead of dissecting the jokes, look at the increments of that piece of theater. Now that includes the dissection of jokes, but you don't start there. What are the blocks that hold this play together? (1992)

In order to understand those 'blocks' let's consider once again Olson's three component model of the comic environment. These components include "a kind of object," "a frame of mind in us," and "the grounds in which we feel." The second component refers wholly to the audience's predisposition to humor, a facet which the playwright has little or no control over, save for an intuitive understanding of what will be perceived as funny. The third component appears to be referring to the audience as well, but what Olson means by the "grounds in which we feel" are the situational circumstances that frame the first element, the object of the humor. Put another way, what is the situation on stage in which the characters find themselves? Or as writer Susan Langer observes in her book The Comic Rhythm (1953) reprinted in part in Comedy: Meaning and Form, "It is not what the joke happens to mean to us that measures our laughter, but what the joke does in the play" (Corrigan 139).
In the introduction to *The Comic Vision* (1971) Peter Monohan writes about three aspects common to all comedies which seems to apply Olson's general principles to a specific case. There is no indication that Monohan is a proponent of Olson's theory but his conclusions are strikingly similar:

Three aspects common to all forms of comedy enable to distinguish between them: the tone of laughter, the treatment of character, and the occasion or situation which causes laughter. Although these three aspects are present in each form of comedy they may vary significantly as they function within it. (2)

Monohan then invites us to consider how the different forms of comedy (i.e. low comedy, comedy of manners, satire, comedy of chaos, and high comedy) help to define the types of characters, situations, and mood—from light to disturbing—in which the laughter is evoked. He cautions that these serve only as approximate guidelines when trying to understand a specific work:

...In the wide field of comedy, forms merge and overlap as the range of action expands, the development of character deepens, and the field of vision broadens.... Great works combine the five forms as they erase the traditional boundaries between comedy, satire, and humor....With these, you can explore the range and depth of specific works and approach a general understanding of the nature of comedy. (4-5)

As an example Nelson suggests that Moliere's comedy, *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* can best be understood as situational manipulation within a typical comedy of manners form:

This is comedy of situation, with everyone's role hilariously reversed through contrived misunderstanding:... Moliere's aim will be to top this, and to keep topping it, by adding more misunderstandings and deceits. (107)
Other comedies rely more heavily on character manipulation for humorous effect. The dark aspects of *Waiting For Godot* can perhaps be better understood in considering that Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, and Pozzo may represent multi-levels of character. Within the surface comedy they are real persons with their comic banter and slapstick revealing identifiable needs. On the metaphorical level the cruel facets in the humor represent disturbing aspects of humanity; man’s slavery to convention and habit, man’s inhumanity to man, the futility of marking time in a meaningless universe.

Thus another essential key to understanding comedy is not surprisingly to apply the same analysis that we would to any drama, by attempting to understand character motivation and the building blocks of dramatic action. As Stephen Haggard writes in "The Craft of Comedy" (1946):

> I know from life the difference between causing laughter by relating something which is in itself amusing (comedy through situation), and so exaggerating the relation of some perfectly ordinary experience as to create laughter at the manner of telling it (comedy through character). (Seyler and Haggard, 14)

A character in a play who comically displays aggressive behavior might be doing so because the playwright is revealing a cruel aspect in his nature. That same character might instead be enmeshed in a frustrating web of humorous contradictions which might be saying more about discrepancies within our society. In either case the playwright may not be writing for laughs but for the subtlety gained by the comic effect. As Christopher Fry observes:
I know that when I set about writing a comedy the idea presents itself to me first of all as tragedy. The characters press on to the theme with all their divisions and perplexities heavy about them; they are already entered for the race to doom, and good and evil are an infernal tangle skinning the fingers that try to unravel them. If the characters were not qualified for tragedy there would be no comedy, and to some extent I have to cross the one before I can light on the other. (Corrigan, 17)

Susan Langer also regards humor as a "by-product" of a well constructed comedy. She contends that a great comedy must first be great drama, with the most noticeable difference being in the feeling of rhythm between the two:

Humor is the brilliance of drama, a sudden heightening of the vital rhythm. A good comedy, therefore, builds up to every laugh; a performance that has been filled up with jokes at the indiscretion of the comedian or of his writer may draw a long series of laughs, yet leave the spectator without any clear impression of a very funny play. (Corrigan, 136)

Marlin-Jones also extols the importance of rhythm to the vitality of a piece of drama. He sees the essence of classical comic structure as the one-one-one-two punch of the prizefighter, hitting with the left hand when it’s least expected. "It is teaching a rule," he states, "then making us relax and at peace with the rule and then causing a new war on our sensibilities." Marlin-Jones further suggests that it is the combined rhythms of say six different characters on stage that give a work its comic punch, enabling the playwright to work with rich layers of subtext:

Instead of one person standing up there and manipulating rhythm [as in a stand-up comic], you suddenly have all the complexities of six characters with six sets of rhythms. And as you play one combination of rhythms against another you create its third reality and then it’s much harder to watch out for the left hand. (Interview, 1992)
But as Langer states, "...the humor in a good comedy does not strike us directly. What strikes us directly is the dramatic illusion, the stage action as it evolves." [my emphasis] Thus "the joke,...seems as funny as its occurrence in the total action makes it." This she explains accounts for why a "very mild joke in just the right place may score a big laugh." Langer further asserts that if the rhythm of the action is executed correctly there won't be "the letdown that usually occurs after an ordinary laugh" for "the action carries over from one laugh to another, sometimes fairly far spaced; people are laughing at the play, not at a string of jokes" (Corrigan, 138).

It seems clear then that in order to fully understand the craft of a comedy one must look primarily at the syner­gistic nature of its component parts. Dramatic action, character development and need, the form and style of the play itself, the context of the humorous material within, and the rhythmic tempo of the piece as a whole are all elements that must blend to create a play that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Before proceeding to the task at hand this chapter con­cludes with the insightful remarks that closed L.C. Knight's essay "Notes on Comedy" (1964) in which he appropriately observes:

No theory of comedy can explain the play; no theory of comedy will help us to read it more adequately. Only a morbid pedantry would be blind to the function of laughter in comedy, but concentration upon laughter leads to a double error: the dilettante critic falls before the
hallucination of the Comic Spirit, the more scientifically minded persuade themselves that the jokes collected by Bergson and Freud have something to do with the practice of literary criticism.
(Corrigan, 191)
CHAPTER TWO

I'M NOT RAPPAPORT

I'm Not Rappaport became the first--and presently the only--major hit for its author Herb Gardner. It was a surprise Tony award winner for best play on Broadway for the 1985-86 season up against, coincidentally, a revised version of Guare’s House of Blue Leaves which garnered four Tonys of its own. The closest thing to a smash prior to this came 23 years earlier when Gardner first burst on the scene at age 27 with A Thousand Clowns (1962), a charming and well received full-length play that starred Jason Robards in both the stage and film versions. A Thousand Clowns was not a runaway success, but it did give Gardner a respectable claim as a playwright of promise to the competitive world of theater.

Gardner’s career as a writer began relatively late after a series of false starts in other professions. His first intention was to become a serious artist, but he found himself taking a job for a time as a sculptor of nativity scenes for a window display company. (He jokingly claims he was fired for making the wise men cross-eyed). He then found relative success as a cartoonist, but this too was disillusioning and short-lived. “Everyone was recommending psychiatric treatment because I’d quit this successful venture,” Gardner was
quoted as saying in an interview for the N.Y. Times (Bennetts 1985, H7(N), "but I wanted to be a writer."

Gardner’s hesitant plunge into the writing business parallels the misgivings and fear that Jason Robard’s character, Murray Burns, experiences over quitting his job in *A Thousand Clowns*. Burns is a writer for “Chucks the Chipmunk,” a television program for kids. The day he walks off the job is the very same day he notices himself muttering “Gosh an’ gollies you betcha!” when a bartender inquires if he wants an onion in his martini. Art imitates life once again in Gardner’s *The Goodbye People* (1974) when Arthur, a young sculptor of pixies and elves for a Christmas display, laments being trapped in a job he’s endured for 18 years. Like Gardner, Arthur finally finds the courage to abandon his profession, willing to face failure in new ventures rather than continue “dying alive” as the character declares. But Gardner himself takes no credit for fearlessly making the leap that he so admires in his characters. “I endow my characters with all the courage I don’t have,” he admits. “The consistency, the conviction, the integrity that’s willing to be tested...”

Part of the reason for Gardner’s self-deprecation probably stems from his questionable work ethic as a writer. “Usually I’ve waited years in between plays,” he confesses. “I was always scared to go back....For a number of years I only wrote in looseleaf notebooks because I wanted to think
it was just my homework. If I actually thought it was my profession, I’d be paralyzed."

The experience of writing *I’m Not Rappaport* and its subsequent success seems to have been a turning point for Gardner. Encouraged by artistic director Dan Sullivan of the Seattle Repertory Theater, where the play opened in 1985 before eventually moving to Broadway, Gardner appeared to be writing with a sense of new found enthusiasm:

"I’d written this play, and I wasn’t sure what to do with it. What Dan Sullivan managed to do was to replace the terror with a genuine work process. He made me feel like writing plays again. (Bennetts, H17)

The spark that triggered the idea for *I’m Not Rappaport* occurred in 1983 while Gardner was strolling through Central Park. As Gardner tells it,

"There was an old white guy and an old black guy. They’d be silent for long periods, and then they’d be yelling. And yet they would come back every day; they wouldn’t sit with anybody but each other. They were obviously friends, and getting a big kick out of hollering at each other....I started imagining what these two old guys were yelling, and why they were friends, and it just kind of took over.

That *I’m Not Rappaport* proved successful as a comedy is ironic because in many ways it is the antithesis of traditional comic structure. There are no lovers to be reconciled at play’s end; no quick entrances and exits, no son to usurp power from a father or authority figure, no complex plot twists. True, the violence never really threatens to seriously harm, but we’re still left with the threat at play’s end. Basically it’s just a play about two old guys sitting on a park bench talking. Yet how richly Gardner mines the
comic possibilities in such a simple premise. From the outset the dialogue smoothly and hilariously reveals the idiosyncrasies of the characters, plants the seeds for conflict, and engenders the listener with sympathy for the daily obstacles these two crusty oldsters have to face. Moreover the first humorous set-up, development, and punch-line is established immediately, setting the comic tone and rhythm for the rest of the play. [My comments in brackets]:

NAT: O.K...What were we talking about?

MIDGE: (No response. He continues to read his newspaper for a moment) We wasn’t talking. You was talking. (Turns page) I wasn’t talking.

NAT: O.K., so what was I saying?

MIDGE: I wasn’t listening either. You was doing the whole thing by yourself....

NAT:[comic set-up:]...Stop pretending to read. You can’t see anything.

MIDGE: [development:] Hey, how ’bout you go sit with them old dudes in fronta the Welfare Hotel, them old butter brains...or some o’ them junkie-folk yonder, whyn’t you go mess with them? ‘Cause I’m not talking to you anymore, Mister. Puttin’ you on notice of that. You may’s well be talking to that tree over there.

NAT: It’s a lamppost. [payoff] (Gardner 1986, 4)

In that brief opening passage we’ve learned several things beyond what the setting itself reveals. First of all the dialogue begins in mid-stream, in media res, giving the impression that these guys have been bickering like this for a long time. Secondly, Nat (the white man) provides the impetus for the continued banter, hence the friendship, between the two men. Thirdly, Midge (the black man) is a
realist. He's also nearly blind. But he refuses to identify himself with the other old people that he mockingly refers to. He has caught our interest because he has either got much more going for him than other folks his age, or he at least believes he does. Finally the humor is disarming, perhaps preventing us from fully sympathizing with the pair's infirmities until later, because of the current distancing effect that the humor imposes. Without the comedy we might be experiencing pathos, and viewing the whole scene as soppily sentimental. This is an example of what George Meredith must mean when he says that "the test of true comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter" (Johnson, et al., 269).

Another interesting facet of the humor is that Gardner is playing with a richly incongruent premise. Midge keeps insisting he's not listening, while in reality he's not only listening, he's fully engaged in the conversation! In fact his "refusal" to participate in the dialogue, and later in Nat's wild schemes, are contradicted by his behavior throughout the play. This is a rich comic premise because it plays on two levels; as a humorous undercurrent throughout, and as a revealer of Truth. Shakespeare famous phrase, "Methinks thou doth protest too much," is certainly applicable to Midge. We all want to be noticed, to be included, to be accepted as a part of the larger community. Midge's protests to the contrary hint at how desperately he longs to be a part
of that community, or at least imply his need for companionship.

In terms of thematic content most critics agree that the play's premise revolves around "the fate of the aged" (Watt 1985, 223), and "how badly elders are treated in our society" (Review 1985, 209). Yet few reviewers even hint at the more subtle theme that transcends the aging issue, that of how to maintain one's individuality and dignity within an ambivalent if not uncaring culture. Gardner's choice of two feisty octogenarians as representative misfits of society is particularly fitting because for some reason society does not regard the elderly as much of a threat. Thus when they do fight back--beginning with Nat's impersonation of a lawyer to get Midge's job back--it's both comic and poignant. Yet as victims they still serve as reminders of the wholesale arrogant disregard for those who fall outside the norm. That Nat is Jewish and that Midge is black emphasize their disenfranchisement even more. Their courage in both fighting the system and finally facing the truth about their innocuous place in it, echoes the more subtle theme of dignity in the face of adversity, while accenting the more obvious theme of survival. These themes become more evident as the threats become more menacing.

For instance, early in the second act Nat has been roughed up by a Central Park drug pusher. Midge, who the previous day had bravely stood by Nat's side, begins to yield
to the hopelessness of their victimization when he decides to give the mugger back his knife:

NAT: So; the Cossack leaves his sword and you return it.

MIDGE: You bet. (Settles down on ledge)

NAT: (Leans toward him) You have had a taste of revolution and will not be able to return to subjection, to living in an occupied country!

MIDGE: Watch me. [my italics] (Rappaport, 66)

The implication here is that Midge is too much of a realist to let his newly found idealism take root. His survival instincts are too strong. Of course Nat and Midge are victims of more than just physical violence, which in the play serves to accentuate the more omnipresent threats of ageism, forced retirement, and economic oppression. In turn these very real perils hint at the less obvious theme of a society that cannot tolerate the non-conformist. If one misses the point about the subtler aspects of subtext and sees only the theme of the oppressed aged as a contrived backdrop for what reviewer Benedict Nightingale describes as "wry quips and waggish retorts" (1986, 212), one might readily jump to his conclusion that Gardner suffers from "an affliction one might call Neilsonitis" (212). One might also deduce, as reviewer David Roper did, that within the play "ageism is the only sin that rears its ugly head" (1986, 29).

If viewed in this light of plot contrivances and comic book violence the humor would appear to be a string of one-liners held loosely together by a sentimentalized trivializa-
tion of the plight of the aged. Posterity may not regard *I'm Not Rappaport* as a modern American classic, but Gardner has written a much more multidimensional play than what these critics assert. Fortunately for Gardner there are reviewers who support the notion that he has written a thoughtful play about serious issues, which are served both by the comedy and the incidents that comprise the action:

In somber terms [*I'm Not Rappaport*] is about the importance of illusions in the ugly face of fact, but this is, by no means or intent, a somber play. Gardner has cooked up a delightful fantasy comedy with real characters poised delicately in an egg-shell world of reality. (Barnes 1985, 224)

In a review in *Time*, William A. Henry III affirms:

Herb Gardner...celebrates fighting the system as a way to keep the soul alive. So when he puts two old men on a bench in *I'm Not Rappaport*, it is not surprising that they are engaging codgers, inspired liars, tattered but gallant knights-errant. ...Their skirmishes are uproarious. (1984, 94)

The question remains however, how much of the "uproar" serves the whole? Are the comic sequences merely a string of gags or do they emphasize thematic content and help to propel events in the play forward? The latter seems to be clearly the case especially when one considers the source of most of the humorous exchanges. That source is Nat himself, who as an unrepentant socialist and iconoclast is still trying to slay society's dragons. It is Nat against the world and from the very first interchange with Midge it is clear others must earn his trust before he will include them on his battlefront. Thus Nat's untruths and impersonations are his way of coping with a hostile universe. That his antics provide
the wellspring from which flows many hilarious lines of dialogue is secondary. For what better way can demonstrate Nat's disenfranchisement from society than for Nat to pretend he's in the mainstream of that society? (For instance throughout the course of the play he poses as a government agent, a learned psychiatrist, a lawyer, etc.) As Nat confides to Midge early in Act One, "A year ago I'm standing in line at the Medicaid, [a fact he's probably ashamed of] a fellah comes up to me--boom, I'm an undercover" (6).

Another example is when Midge innocently believes Nat's outlandish story of being a hired government informant named Hernando:

NAT:...they also gave me a code name, "Harry."

MIDGE: "Harry?"

NAT: Harry Schwartzman.

MIDGE: What's your real name?

NAT: Sam Schwartzman...

MIDGE:...So, do ya ever pick up any information for them?

NAT: Are you kidding? Sitting on a bench all day with a man who can't tell a tree from a lamppost? (6-7)

A few moments later Nat indignantly defends his practice of playing the imposter, at the same time emphasizing the darker motivations behind it, when Midge accuses him of lying:

NAT: Not lies--Alterations!...Sometimes the truth don't fit; I take in here, I let out there, till if fits. The truth? What's true is a triple bypass last year at Lenox Hill, what's true is Grade Z cuts of meat from the A and P, a Social Security check that wouldn't pay the rent for a chipmunk;...Six minutes dead is true--(Takes bunch of pages from briefcase) here, Dr.
Reissman's bills; here's the phone number, call him. A fact. And that was my last fact. Since then alterations. Since I died, a new policy!...I was one person for eighty-one years, why not a hundred for the next five? (12)

When Nat takes on such outlandish aliases, Gardner is amplifying the discrepancy between what Nat is (a foolish old man) and what he claims to be (most often a highly successful professional). The humor results in the incongruity between his imagined self image and reality.

That the humor is funniest when the stakes are highest is further proof that the humor serves the plot rather than the reverse. As the real threats of violence and age discrimination increase, the humor becomes a safety valve to release the tension, demonstrating perhaps the validity behind Freud's "psychic release" theory of Chapter One. As an example, Nat impersonates a Mafia don in Act Two, and talks Midge into grudgingly going along with his plan to help Laurie (the pretty artist who frequents the park) in getting out of a debt she owes a violent drug dealer (referred to as the Cowboy). To demonstrate the way the humor plays as comic relief to the violence would necessitate quoting several pages of dialogue. But the following passage hints at Gardner's skillful blend of humor and tension:

(The Cowboy starts toward him ...Nat will remain aloof behind his sunglasses, seldom facing the Cowboy, never raising his voice)

THE COWBOY: (Approaching bench) What about Laurie Douglas? Who are you?

NAT: I am Donatto. Sit.
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THE COWBOY: Look, if that junkie bimbo thinks she can--

NAT: The junkie bimbo is my daughter. Sit.

THE COWBOY: She's got a father, huh? (Sits) Thought things like her just accumulated.

NAT: (Taking old silver case from jacket, removing small cigar) Not that kind of father. Another kind of father. I have many daughters, many sons. In my family there are many children. I am Donatto.

(He lights the cigar. The Cowboy studies him)

THE COWBOY: I never heard of--

NAT: On your level, probably not. (Patting the Cowboy's knee) A lot of you new boys don't know. I fill you in. My people, we work out of Phoenix. We take commands from Nazzaro, Los Angeles; Capetti, New Orleans (No response; Nat leans toward him) Capetti, New Orleans... (Turns to Midge) Jack, he doesn't know Capetti, New Orleans... (Gardner, 98-99)

It is the sheer chutzpah of Nat's character that makes this scene both funny and tragic at the same time. But naturally Nat's outrageous plan isn't going to work. (If it did then perhaps the comedy would seem too contrived.) When the Cowboy eventually threatens Nat, Midge intervenes and is subsequently beaten up and hospitalized. Evidently since we don't actually see all the violence, Gardner's detractors view the brutality as superficial and unreal:

Although they [Nat and Midge] deal with a drug dealer and a mugger... the encounters lack any real violence, with the result that the play... lacks any real frisson. (Roper, 29)

Others contend the violence does not go far enough, as if by necessity someone must die in order to take any of this very seriously:

Nat's schemes to overcome these two hoods land first himself, later Midge in the hospital. The graveyard
would be more likely, but then there would be no play. (Simon 1985, 73)

But a play divided against itself will not stand, and if Gardner were to resort to a graphic display of bloodletting in the midst of a comedy he surely would be reproached for truly "pandering" to the baser instincts of the crowd, as Simon also accuses. That the humor helps to soften the immediate perception of a harsher reality should not detract from an intelligent audience's ability to contemplate the darker messages that are implied.

We also must not forget that since theater is a collaborative effort "another director might make more of the play's dark aspect," as critic Dan Sullivan for the Los Angeles Times noted (1987, sec. VI 4). But was it Gardner's intent to write about darker truths, or was he merely trying to milk laughs by manipulating comical characters struggling with serious issues? In response to similar questions put to him regarding I'm Not Rappaport (and other of his plays that flirt with tragic themes) Gardner replied:

The only thing I'm aware of is that most funny stuff is born of a certain kind of pain. But when you ask me why things keep coming out like that in my plays, the most honest answer is, I don't know....To me the fact that these people are hopeful is what makes them not hopeless. I guess I think of these people as survivors. (Bennetts, H 17)

Another allusion to a darker reality arises out of Nat's impersonation of an attorney for "HURTSFOE", an acronym for "human rights strike force", a bogus agency Nat conjured up to help get Midge's job back as a janitor of a high-rise. Once again however, behind the mirth is a serious
issue; that of shuffling our old and supposedly useless citizens out of the mainstream of life. Midge's character serves as counterpoint to Nat and helps then to root the play in more realistic soil. By sympathizing with Midge's situation one is compelled to view Nat's outrageous meddling as prompted by genuine concern and not just an excuse for comedic and superfluous chatter. Indeed, this element—the affection and rapport between the main characters—lends further credibility to a synergistic interpretation of the play as a whole:

As [Nat and Midge] egg each other on to battle, they also come to know and trust each other. Hence Rappaport is less a problem drama than a kind of love story....(Henry III, 94)

...the two oldsters grow in stature and interest as the play enfolds, with some funny lines in the longish running time. (Review, 209)

As further reinforcement of thematic content Nat's only other "ally" in his struggle to maintain dignity in a hostile world is his daughter Clara. We discover however that she is only one of four children that will have anything to do with him, and her helpfulness comes in the form of a well intentioned but inflexible insistence that Nat behave like a dutiful senior citizen. She insists that Nat either move in with her, be placed in a nursing home, or sign up for geriatric day care. Nat wittily sums up the choices. "O.K., we got three possibilities," he remarks. "We got exile in Great Neck. We got Devil's Island. And we got Kindergarten. All rejected" (81). It is fitting and poignant that what is
seemingly a benign humorous exchange, by play's end becomes for Nat a harsh reality:

    NAT: (Starts to rise, using bench for support) Unfortunately, I must leave now...
    MIDGE: (Turns to him, smiles) Best news I heard all day.
    NAT: I am expected at the Senior Center at noon...I must be prompt; Clara checks up. (109)

    If these situations are simply set-ups for the humor, the contrived house of dramatic trick cards would eventually come tumbling down by the end of Act II. People might laugh but they would do so grudgingly, feeling manipulated by the author's use of witty dialogue. This is not the case; not if the play is judged by how appealing and successful it's been perceived by audiences for more than seven years now. (After Broadway it had a long run in Los Angeles and is still quite popular in regional theaters around the country.)

    That is not to say however that there are not minor flaws in the overall writing. And it is no surprise that these flaws occur with the lesser characters as is often the case. Davey Marlin-Jones reviewed the play while a critic in Washington, D.C. and had this to say about his first impressions:

    Basically it has through line problems and all those peripheral characters in no way belong to the center of the play. They are bit players in somebody else's vision. And the two central characters' "character comedy" is quite wonderful...The sense of what the value of life is all about is sweet and affirming and to a great extent earned as long as you stick with the two major characters...(Interview 1992)
In regards to the comic technique used in this play—and in other of Gardner’s work—it seems obvious that the playwright naturally thinks in comedic terms. In a group interview with other comic playwrights in 1985 he stated, “We have no way of writing a scene in which there won’t be something funny. We hear life like that—with things missing” (Guernsey Jr., 371). The title I’m Not Rappaport itself comes from an old vaudeville routine, made famous by Willie Howard, that Nat and Midge perform in Act One while stoned on marijuana, an hilarious scene written with comic precision.

Overall the humor in the play proceeds more out of character than situation and Garner relies heavily on exaggeration of character traits for much of the comic effect. In the following scene, which takes place early in Act One, each of the old men’s wildly out of proportion quirks are revealed. The humor does not rely heavily on the standard joke technique of set-up and payoff as exemplified in an earlier example, but rather on the incongruity within each character and the vivid contrast between the two of them. Midge makes himself so unobtrusive and inconspicuous in the world it’s laughable, while Nat is the exact opposite, drawing so much attention to himself through bravado and bluff that he unwittingly invites disaster:

NAT: ...Look at you;...Is this what you had in mind for old, this guy here?...Is this how you want to spend it?...No, wrong; you gotta shake things up, fellah,; you gotta make things happen--

MIDGE: (Truly outraged) Hold it now!...Don’t shake nothin’ up. How you figure I keep my job? Near
fifteen years past retirement, how you figure I’m still super there? I ain’t mentioned a raise in fifteen years, and they ain’t neither...Mister, you lookin’ at the wise old invisible man.

NAT: No, I’m looking at a dead man! (Points cane at him) Fifteen years, no raise; it’s a dead person, a ghost! You let them rob you!

MIDGE:...nobody robs me, got a system. You see that boy come every day, five o’clock? That’s Gilley; give him three bucks, nobody robs me. Ten blocks from here to my place, walks me there, protects me.

NAT: From who?

MIDGE: Him, for one. Fifteen a week, he don’t rob me— but nobody else neither, see; now that’s Social Security—....

NAT:...What do you know? What does a ghost know? (Rising proudly) People see me; ...I make them see me! (His cane in the air) the night they rushed me to Lenox Hill for the bypass...six tenants called the Landlord to see if my apartment was available. Now, every day, every day at dawn I ring their bells, all six of them—the door opens, I holler “Good morning, Vulture; Four B is still unavailable!...” (13-15)

As playwright Joseph Stein states: “Jokes as such don’t mean anything in the theater. They don’t work. Relationships and characters are what count. If you have the right relationships as a springboard, you’ll find the humor” (Guernsey, Jr. 1985, 376).

Gardner himself admits to patterning Nat and Midge after odd characters he remembers from childhood, in homes that included Coney Island and the Lower East Side. “I grew up with these people who lived at the tops of their voices,” he recalls. “Some of them were in my family, some were just around. There were these cafeterias, and these guys in berets and goatees would sit and yell about Trotsky, and
about wars long since fought...I remember these guys holler-
ing and caring that much, still” (Bennetts, H17).

It is probably no accident that characters in other of
his works such as The Goodbye People and A Thousand Clowns
resonate with much of the same idealism and iconoclasm that
pervades this play. That most of his characters almost
always lose their heroic battles is probably no coincidence
either. Yet Gardner sees it differently:

"I don't think they lose as much as the people who
never tried. If you go into the battle, you don't lose;
you lose by standing and watching...I know I write this
stuff, and I see how it comes out--the despair, the
debris that this idealism leaves around. There is a
price you pay. But what's more thrilling than operating
against the odds? I mean look at me--I'm putting on a
play. (Bennetts, H 17)

Gardner admits he writes plays out of an imperative to
write; not because he likes the idea of being a writer; not
because it's his only way to earn a living. In doing so he
only works on plays that beckon to be written. This allows
characters to take on a life of their own. "I suppose there
is some connection between these characters and my choosing
to write in the first place," he confesses. "Part of the
choice I make for all of these characters is the one I make
for myself, which is to live at the edge. It certainly keeps
you alert" (Bennetts, H17). Thus it is no surprise that his
characters take on an almost mythic quality. Born of ideal-
ism and immersed in reality they are projections of a collec-
tive modern day schizophrenia as filtered through Gardner's
comedic mind. As T.G.A. Nelson writes, as if peering into
the soul of Nat himself, “Indestructibility, or something like it, is an especially strong characteristic of the modern fool, who often emerges as the miraculous survivor in an indiscriminately murderous universe” (118).

Summary

It seems ironic that some of the very same critics that dismiss *I’m Not Rappaport’s* structure and thematic content as being frivolous and shallow, provide the best argument for an interpretation of the play as a skillful blend of both comedy and drama. For these very same critics point out that Gardner manages to avoid the trap of a happy, predictable formula ending, a feat which could not be possible if Gardner had not carefully set it up in the first place:

[Gardner] has one more trick: Instead of a speciously sentimental happy ending, he provides a speciously sentimental not-so-happy ending. (Simon, 73)

If an implied declaration of genuine affection between two irascible old characters who are perhaps parting for the last time can be described as “speciously sentimental,” one can certainly understand how similar minded critics might dismiss the craft behind more subtler aspects of theme and plot. It seems clear that Gardner’s characters are compelled to such an ending, not because of a superimposed need for realism or even melodrama, but because it fits. As William Henry III in *Time* so succinctly observes, “What gives the play a sad undertone of truth is the inescapable fact that they do not and cannot win” (94).
MIDGE: ....long’s we talkin’ mouth damage, boy--lawyer for the Tenants’ Committee found out there ain’t no HURTSFOE; I’m outa my job now.

NAT: I...I deeply regret-

MIDGE: ‘Sides which, look what you done to Laurie.... And long’s we keepn’ score here, what happened to Gilley?...Gilley’s back ain’t he?....So seems to me you pretty much come up "O" for Five on the whole series here. (107-108)

That simple solutions are not offered, that Nat and Midge still must deal with the menaces that plagued them in Act One give even more credence to the idea that Gardner really is saying something both humorous and viable; not just about age discrimination or things that go bump in a park at night, but about the more insidious truth that it takes real courage to show one’s true colors in an often colorless society. Thus I’m Not Rappaport is a comedy in the full sense of the word; the humor emerging from character dimension and providing a life affirming balance to the harsher realities that plague these modern day “knights-errant”. Nat and Midge are not merely comic spokespersons for the aged, but loving reminders that there can be real dignity in individualism, and that that dignity is undaunted by age, race, or the fact that the dragons one has been slaying are still breathing fire.
CHAPTER THREE

BROADWAY BOUND

Neil Simon’s *Broadway Bound* is itself a study in comedy writing and technique, chronicling the comic roots of one of America’s most celebrated and prolific playwrights. With twenty-seven plays to his credit Simon has had a new show running on Broadway virtually every year since 1961. Add to that list seventeen motion pictures, Emmys for his early television work, and “more Academy Award and Tony nominations than any other writer” (Wood 1989a, 10), and one can readily understand why Simon biographer Robert K. Johnson concludes that Simon is “one of the finest writers of comedy in American literary history” (1983, 144).

enough, one of two other finalists for the Pulitzer that year was John Guare for *Six Degrees of Separation*.)

Simon has taken issue with the perception that these works are a literal representation of his younger years. "The one thing that becomes a little irksome is that everyone assumes that my plays are autobiographic," Simon explained in a 1989 interview. "I mean, if they were, I would have called the character Neil Simon" (Wood 1989b, 10).

Another tender spot for Simon is the long held view that his greatest talent lies in his ability to write line after funny line, and not in his proficiency as a dramatist. "I think I write as serious as I need to," he defends, "but I think it is a play you’re after and not either a comedy or a drama...*Biloxi Blues* goes from funny to sad to hilarious to tragic, and I didn’t plan it out. It just happened..." (Wood 1989b, 10). Earlier in his career Simon admitted that he was "guilty on occasion of stuffing a one-liner into some character’s mouth," according to Robert K. Johnson in his biography *Simon* (1983, 140). "Quickly though he weeded such lines from the drafts of his newer plays." As Simon himself has stated, "I used to ask ‘what is a funny situation?’ Now I ask ‘What is a sad situation and how can I tell it humorously’" (Johnson, 34). To be sure there are many quotable funny lines in *Broadway Bound*, as when Eugene observes, "There’s so much material in this house. Maybe I don’t have to become a writer. If only I could get enough people to pay for seats in the living room" (37). Yet there are many poignant pas-
sages as well, such as when Eugene’s mother Kate says to her husband, “I didn’t expect to get through a lifetime without you touching another woman. But having feelings for her is something I can never forgive” (58). Still for all its depth Broadway Bound has its share of detractors, and most of them make a valid criticism. The basic problem is not that Simon skirted around serious issues in pursuit of the laugh. The real problem is “that there are serious scenes and there is some wonderful comedy but they very seldom co-exist” (Marlin-Jones). This contrasts with Gardner’s use of humor in I’m Not Rappaport in which the comic tone takes the edge off the serious moments allowing a release of tension when the ride becomes a little rough. With Simon the painful moments are on a different track entirely from the humor. As Frank Rich reported in the N.Y. Times:

Broadway Bound contains some of its author’s most accomplished writing to date--passages that dramatize the timeless, unresolvable bloodlettings of familial existence as well as the humorous conflicts one expects. But the seamless merging of laughter, character and emotion that ignited Biloxi Blues is only intermittently achieved here. (1986, 112)

Or as Jack Kroll points out, there is a moment when Kate berates her husband Jack for his infidelity and he cries out, “There is no other woman!” Kate immediately retorts, “Why not?” Kroll views this as one of the rare moments in the play (and not a very funny one at that) where “a gag amplifies the pathos...but such fusions of laughter and pain are few” (1986, 115).
That the critical focus on Simon’s work has shifted from his use of comedy to a discussion of dramatic elements is in itself evidence of his growth as a playwright. As further evidence of that growth, Simon’s greatest triumph in Broadway Bound is not a comic scene but a stirring sensitive interlude between Eugene and his mother. At Eugene’s urging to "tell the story one more time", Kate poignantly relives the one crowning moment of her youth; the night she danced with George Raft. Swept up in the nostalgic tale, the young Eugene glides his mother across the kitchen floor to the accompanying strains of Benny Goodman’s “It Had To Be You” blaring on the radio. Reviewer John Beaufort of the Christian Science Monitor applauds the sequence as the "tenderest scene America’s contemporary master of comedy has ever written....a magic unforgettable moment" (1986, 116). Once the nostalgic spell is broken, Eugene steps back into the narrative role and laments, “I’ll be honest about one thing. Dancing with my mother was very scary. I was doing what my father should have been doing with her but wasn’t. And holding her like that and seeing her smile was too intimate for me to enjoy...” (103). Even if such tender moments exist apart from Simon’s funnier scenes, the George Raft sequence illustrates the depth of characterization in Broadway Bound.

It is when characters are most vividly drawn that the potential for what Meredith calls “thoughtful laughter” is most possible. In a November 17th, 1991 article in the N.Y.
writer/performer Roger Rosenblatt delineates the difference between the type of humor that flows from character and the type that is forced, or imposed on one-dimensional creations. "Humor is character, comedy personality...," he asserts. "Dimension. That’s what I’m learning, the difference between humor and comedy, between the laugh that lasts forever and the one that evaporates as soon as it hits air. Humor is giving, and comedy is taking away..." (H5). In further comparing the two types of humor Rosenblatt argues that "Jokes, mere jokes, are a way of putting people off at a distance, and of keeping oneself at a distance from them. An act of aggression and of self-protection all in one."

In *Broadway Bound* Simon has endowed his characters with all the "dimensional" quality of which Rosenblatt speaks. Even as early in his career as *The Odd Couple* there are strokes of genius in his characterizations of Felix and Oscar, or later, in the *Sunshine Boys*, Willie and Al. So much of the humor in *Broadway Bound* depends on our intimate knowledge of the characters, it is difficult to appreciate the impact of the lines apart from who is speaking them. While watching the movie version of the play with several others present, laughter occurred in places where *what* was said was insignificant; *how* it was said and *who* was saying it made the lines funny. This certainly owes something to talented acting and gifted directing, but the seeds for such
"contextual humor" were planted in the skillful fleshing out of the characters in the writing process.

A prime example is the grandfather Ben. Early in Act One Eugene lets us in on a family secret:

The strange thing about my grandfather is, he has totally no sense of humor. None. But everything he says, I think is funny. Maybe because he doesn't mean it to be. If he tried to be funny, he wouldn't be...(8)

Moments later when Ben tries to tell the following joke, the effect is hilarious:

BEN: What kind of fish sings an opera?

EUGENE: What kind of fish sings an opera?...I give up. What kind?

BEN: A halibut.

EUGENE: A halibut?

BEN: I got it wrong. I thought it was a halibut, but it doesn't sound right.

EUGENE: (To audience) Okay? I guarantee you that a halibut is funnier than the real answer...I mean, look at him. Sitting there with a hat on. If he put it on to be funny, it would be dumb. But he doesn't know he's got it on, so it's hysterical. (9)

Later in Act Two when Eugene and his brother Stan anxiously await Ben's reaction to a radio broadcast of their very first comedy skit, Ben says, "To me comedy has to have a point. What was the point of this?" Yet moments later he adds, "I liked the talking dog. 'Si, si!' He didn't make any points, but he made me laugh. 'Si, si!'" (80). Out of context this passage isn't very funny. But because Ben's nature contains such contradictory elements--he thinks he knows what makes something funny and he doesn't--the effect is priceless.
Various theoretical explanations might explain such humorous moments, (beyond the obvious incongruity in Ben’s logic)---i.e. the superiority theory: it is funny because it creates a feeling of superiority in us since we do have a sense of humor; or the displacement theory: it is funny because Ben goes from a relevant statement to an irrelevant one;--but this would be missing the point. Theories notwithstanding, it is the rich characterizations that provide the proper context to maximize a technique’s comic punch, and more importantly to allow us to care about the actions going on in the play. “In the past if I went too long without getting a laugh I got scared and put in a joke,” Simon confided in a 1986 interview. “These days I rarely think about jokes. The funny thing is, I now get laughs in the straight scenes, not from one-liners, but from the characters or the situation” (Wilson, 116).

In Broadway Bound the “situation” largely revolves around the break-up of Kate and Jack’s marriage, and the subtly destructive effect this has on the other members of the family. The collapse of the Jerome marriage is clearly a replication of Simon’s own childhood experience as he readily admits. “Broadway is set in the midst of the war between my father and mother as their marriage disintegrated,” he confesses (Wilson, 116). When asked if he is averse to drawing on personally painful experiences in his work Simon replied, “The more painful the better, because it’s closer to the truth” (Wood 1989a, 10).
This theme of the importance of family unity is a recurring one in many of Simon's plays. In *Come Blow Your Horn*, Alan and Buddy (also based on Neil and his brother Danny) have difficulty breaking off relations with their father even though he is abusive and over-bearing. In the *Sunshine Boys* Al admits the only reason he agreed to a reunion with his former partner Willie is so his grand-children can finally get to see their act. And in *Broadway Bound* Kate represses her youthful ambitions in order to devote more time to the family. As Johnson writes:

...In all his plays from *Come Blow Your Horn* to his most recent work, Simon honors the ultimate symbol of the social network: the family unit. In order to preserve her marriage and to keep her children happy, Millie Michaels in *California Suite*, accepts even the humiliation of talking to her children over the telephone while the arm of the call girl her husband has had sex with lies in Millie's lap. (142)

Even though *Broadway Bound* dramatizes the break-up of a marriage, it is still affirming through the pain it causes the value of a strong family unit. In demonstrating the virtues of sobriety a writer might explore the downside of alcoholism. In a similar fashion Simon seems to be saying through the dysfunctional relationship between Kate and Jack, "look what happens when trust, respect and communication break down." This cause and effect relationship is clearly demonstrated toward the end of the play when Jack has quietly packed his bags and while slipping out tells his father-in-law that he'll call Kate and the boys in a few days and
explain. In the next scene Kate confronts Ben about her suspicions:

KATE: Where is Jack so long?....Is he in the house?
BEN: No.
KATE: Where'd he go, for a walk?
BEN: No.

KATE: He's not in the house and he didn't go for a walk...so where'd he go on a Sunday morning? (She looks at BEN who hasn't moved. And suddenly she realizes...She turns away) Why didn't you tell me?....

BEN:....He's gone, Kate...He moved out...It's as simple as that. (She stands there a moment, not saying a word....EUGENE comes out of the bathroom....)

EUGENE: (To audience) When Mom heard the news about Pop, she didn't cry, she didn't reach for anyone to hug, she didn't make a sound...When I was in the army, they told us, in battle, don't bother attending the wounded who were crying for help...Go to those who didn't make a sound. They were the ones in real trouble...(107-8)

It is as if Simon, who was denied a harmonious childhood in real life, is doomed continually to try to get it right in his art, to purge his own insecurities through his creations. That his "art" comes out funny much of the time makes sense also, for it demonstrates how humorists transform their pain into a comic perspective on life. E.B. White in his essay, "Some Remarks on Humor" elaborates:

One of the things commonly said about humorists is that they are really very sad people--clowns with a breaking heart...It would be more accurate, I think, to say that there is a deep vein of melancholy running through everyone's life and that the humorist, perhaps more sensible of it than some others, compensates for it actively and positively. Humorists fatten on trouble. (Enck et.al, 102)
Simon like most good comic writers seems painfully aware of the anger and rage that fuels the passion behind his work. In a 60 Minutes interview (1992) Simon admitted that he was always afraid to go to a psychiatrist because he equated his neuroses with his talent. Simon's awareness of his repressed hostility is evident in Broadway Bound as well. Following the radio sketch Eugene and his brother are accused by their father of disgracing the family in their comedy writing. Jack cites lines like:

CHUBBY: [the radio comedian] ...I wondered if I could come in and say hello to your family?

MRS. PITKIN: Why? My family doesn't say hello to my family. (Studio laugh) (76)

Or even closer to home the following bit of radio dialogue:

CHUBBY: ...Is it possible to meet your husband?


CHUBBY: What does he do?

MRS. PITKIN: He's in ladies pajamas. (Studio laugh) (77)

Jack actually sells ladies clothing. After Jack confronts his sons concerning what he considers a flagrant ridiculing of their working class life, Eugene admits to his brother:

EUGENE: ...The joke about him being in ladies' pajamas... I didn't mean it the way he said. To me it was just a joke. But maybe I did it subconsciously, ...Only I didn't know I was so angry. Like there's part of my head that makes me this nice, likable, funny kid...and there's the other part, the part that writes, that's an angry, hostile real son of a bitch. (86-7)
Eugene’s subconscious conflicts underscore another key thematic element that is at work in this play. There are shades of the Oedipal struggle demonstrated in both the scene of Eugene dancing with his mother and in the scenes in which the sons (through their comedy routines) usurp authority from the father. As Jack says to his sons after the radio confrontation, “Either you’ve grown up too fast...or I’ve outlived my place in this house” (84). According to T.G.A. Nelson “...[a] play’s handling of the rebellion of child against parent affords a neat illustration of Ludwig Jekel’s theory that in comedy the Oedipal pattern is reversed with guilt displaced from the son on to the father” (142). Grotjahn (1957) also refers to a comedy’s reversed Oedipal situation in which:

The son plays the role of the victorious father with sexual freedom and achievement, while the father is cast in the role of the frustrated onlooker. The reversed Oedipus situation is repeated in every man’s life when the younger generation grows up and slowly infiltrates and replaces the older generation in work and life...This is the point where tragedy and comedy finally meet and symbolize human life. (260)

Eugene and Stan’s father’s eventually leaving the home, shamed by his affairs, demonstrates the tragic element within the Oedipal theme. Eugene and Stan embarking on bright and hopeful futures demonstrate the more hopeful or comic element.

Another theme that is present in Broadway Bound relates to the larger cultural family of which Simon is a part and represents in this trilogy of plays Simon’s first clear will-
iness to confront his Jewish heritage. Beginning with the Baker family in *Come Blow Your Horn* and continuing throughout his career, Simon’s practice was to downplay his cultural roots. “Although the Baker family’s attitudes, speech patterns, and outlook on life are Jewish,” Robert Johnson writes, “Simon refused to specify them as Jews. Apparently in order to make it easier for every member of his theater audience to identify with his characters, Simon continued to shy away from portraying specifically Jewish characters” (6). In *Broadway Bound*, Simon’s willingness to confront his Jewishness makes for richer character delineation and a more realistic base for honesty and truth. The play’s biggest laugh occurs when Kate Jerome touchingly tells of her immigrant grandparent’s reaction to first seeing the Statue of Liberty. “The women were wailing, the men were shaking, everybody praying. You know why?” Kate asks. “Because they were free?” Eugene replies, and Kate says, “Because they took one look at that statue and said, ‘That’s not a Jewish woman. We’re going to have problems again’” (93-94). The critic Jack Kroll accuses Simon of reducing a sensitive scene to a mere gag at that moment. To the contrary, one of the reasons it is so funny is because it has a ring of truth to it. Simon has assimilated once again the truth of his individual pain, in this case as a member of the persecuted Jewish community, into his comedy.

Not only is the comedian born of pain, the comedy writing process itself can also be a trying experience. As
the brothers Eugene and Stan struggle to meet a deadline for a sketch, they fight, argue and scream at one another until finally Stan gives his brother a lecture on the technique of sound comedy writing:

STAN: What’s the essential ingredient in every good sketch we’ve ever seen?

EUGENE: I don’t know what?

STAN: ....You do know. We’ve talked about it. You’re just not thinking....The ingredient in every good sketch we’ve ever seen is conflict!...Remember? ....All right. Now what’s the other ingredient in every good comedy sketch we’ve ever seen?

EUGENE: (Sighs in exasperation) More conflict!

STAN: Come on. You know it...Think about it...Heh?...Do you know it?

EUGENE: Yes. It’s when one brother wants to kill the other brother.

STAN: YES!!

EUGENE: Yes? That’s it?

STAN: It’s close. You said it in that sentence....One brother wants to kill the other brother. The key word is wants! In every comedy, even drama, somebody has to want something and want it bad...Wanting plus conflict equals what?

EUGENE: (Looking heavenward) Oh please, God. Don’t let me get it wrong. (To Stan) A job at CBS.

STAN: Right....

EUGENE:....So now that you know all this, do you have an idea for a sketch?

STAN: No. Do you? (41-43)

As Simon suggests through Stanley, it is no accident that the essentials of good comedy writing correspond with the same elements that make for good drama. “Something I
always try to teach in comedy” Davey Marlin-Jones declared, “start out with real needs, start out with truth and a base, and then carry it out to its illogical extreme. But you can’t get to your illogical extreme until you start with a logical extreme” (Interview 1992).

Simon’s skills as a humorist have been honed so well over years of experience he deftly handles many forms of comedy in this play. There are witty observations as when Eugene says, “It’s just a comedy sketch. Does it have to be so logical? We’re not drawing on plans for the Suez Canal.”(45); or when Stan comments “It’s not funny if it’s not believable,” and Eugene retorts “Oh, you mean the Three Stooges are believable?”(46). There is a running gag with Ben never quite able to remember the name of the “Primrose Ballroom”; and even some patented one-liners as when Eugene says to his mother “Why did they waste years developing the thermometer? You could make a fortune just feeling people in hospitals” (68).

More often than not however the humor cannot be ascribed any single technique but as previously pointed out depends on the audience’s intimate knowledge of the characters. Thus the only common denominator for the humor in Broadway Bound is the reality base from which the humor springs. Whether witticism, sight gag, or observation, the comedy in Broadway Bound consistently emerges from the truth and real needs of the characters of which Marlin-Jones speaks.
The 1940’s Post-war New York setting of *Broadway Bound* provides a believable base from which these comic characterizations are drawn. Clive Barnes in the New York Post (1986) goes so far as to call *Broadway Bound* a “romanticized docudrama”:

Its beauty is in its turn of phrases, little in themselves but perfect in context—saying, for example, that someone could not dance a note, or putting forward the dilemma: ‘I love being a writer, it’s just the writing that’s hard’—and its turn of character” (118).

The credibility of the humorous sequences are only part of the appeal of this play. On closer examination *Broadway Bound* also contains many familiar ingredients found in classic comedies of old, such as in Shakespeare and Restoration comedies. In fact, of the three plays studied in this thesis *Broadway Bound* comes the closest to demonstrating the universal elements of comedy as discussed in Chapter One. The inverted Oedipal pattern previously pointed out is one such universal comedic element. Although there is no romantic love story per se, there is still the mother/son relationship which in a strange way fulfills the same function that romance does in traditional comedies. After the cast had its first read through of the script of *Broadway Bound*, one of the actors remarked, “You know what this is? It’s a love letter from Neil to his mother.” “I didn’t know I was writing a tribute to my mother,” remarked Simon later, “but I guess I was” (Wilson 1986, 15-16).

In considering whether there is a movement toward “harmony and reconciliation” the dual story line must be
taken into account. As previously stated, while one story 
dramatizes the collapse of Kate and Jack's marriage, the 
second story--the emergence of a promising young playwright--is intimately tied to the first. In other words, Simon's 
budding career was fueled by the familial and societal 
conflicts he was exposed to. The normal comedic movement 
towards harmony, while not a clear linear progression in this 
play, is implied in the eventual success of Eugene the pro-
tagonist. There is even the suggestion that while Kate and 
Jack's divorce was painful it never quite reaches the level 
of the tragic in that both partners, especially Jack, seem to 
adapt quite well to their new lives after a time:

EUGENE (To audience) Mom and Pop split up for good and 
never got back together...As a matter of fact, he 
remarried about two years later, to a pretty nice 
woman. Mom would really be hurt if she heard me say 
that, but the truth is the truth...(117)

There is also a strong satiric element in Broadway 
Bound, demonstrated in the holding up for reflection societal 
customs and economic disparities that existed in the Post war 
time period of the play. At one point Eugene comments to his 
mother, "I never see you stop working. When Stanley and I 
make enough money, we're going to get you a maid, Ma." To 
which Kate replies, "A maid? In Brighton Beach? People 
would pay admission to come over and look at her"(91). In 
the relationship between Kate's sister Blanche and their 
father Ben, a vociferous proponent of Trotsky, the economic 
satire is even more biting. Blanche has married a very 
prosperous businessman, a fact which Ben resents due to her
ostentatious display of furs and a new Cadillac. Some funny
observations emerge from this relationship:

  BEN: (Glancing up from his soup) Who's that? Blanche?
        I didn't hear the limousine pull up.

  BLANCHE: It's not a limousine, Poppa. It's just a plain
          Cadillac...

  BEN: Like John D. Rockefeller is just a plain
       businessman...

  BLANCHE: (Putting her purse and gloves on the sofa) It
          got stuck in the snow, just like other cars...(23)

More important than the economic disparities that are
revealed in the play is the element of perseverance that
pervades Broadway Bound. The "comic sense" of which Corrigan
speaks (Chapter One, 9) is clearly in evidence throughout
this play. Each character in his or her own unique way is
learning to cope in a hostile environment. Kate adapts by
making ends meet in a world where a meatloaf might have to
last for three days. Jack, despite infidelity as a husband,
can be faithfully counted on to keep bread on the table.
Ben, despite his age, clings furiously to his Socialist
beliefs in an attempt to make sense of a prosperous nation
indifferent to the poverty around him. The idealistic sons
see the answer to their family's economic woes, and their
escape from an oppressive home, in a relentless pursuit of
success and fame. It is the humor that is the common bond
between these characters and their painful realities; not
only in the humorous exchanges between them, but in the
"comic" view of life that always affirms the best of a bad
situation. As Corrigan states, "...while tragedy is a
celebration of man's capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure" (3). This endurance is evident in the healing that takes place between Jack and his sons by play's end, in which he writes each of them a letter he admonishes them not to open until his death:

STAN: Or maybe the letters say he'll forgive us for what we did. For my saying "go to hell" to him.

EUGENE: He already forgave you. He held your hand in the restaurant...So? Are you going to wait until he dies to read it? (113)

The boys read the letters, and appropriately there are no great revelations, simply an attempt by the father to be understood by the sons. As Eugene says, "contrary to popular belief, everything in life doesn't come to a clear-cut conclusion" (117). Yet the letters serve an important purpose in reminding us of the passing of the baton between generations, in reinforcing the connection once again between the tragic and the comic in life. More than any other Simon vehicle to date, Broadway Bound is a play that attempts to demonstrate vividly that connection, even using Simon's younger stand-in Eugene as a metaphorical product of the fusion between the tragic and comic elements in life. The radio gag, as a comedy within a comedy, serves also as a metaphor for the sweat and struggle involved in producing laughs, and the desire for approval that motivates that struggle. Whether by design or coincidence every element within this play, from the patented Simon one-liners to the
uncharacteristic scenes of pathos emphasizes the dual worlds of pleasure and pain, hope and hopelessness.

It is appropriate then, and ironic, that while the family in Broadway Bound is crumbling before us, a great talent is being given wings. Simon has purposely juxtaposed the two stories, demonstrating how his comic gifts took root in the soil of a troubled family, yet showing how once born into conflict he can never be quite free of that fact. The comedy thus dramatically demonstrates how one can triumph over adversity yet never be wholly divorced from it; just as parents can move beyond the pain of separation though their offspring are poignant reminders of the now lost love that brought them into being. Returning full circle Simon has created in Broadway Bound a loving tribute to the parents that gave him life and helped launch the career of a man who has become a comic spokesperson for an entire generation.
CHAPTER FOUR

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Of the three plays examined in this thesis author John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* attains a level of comic and dramatic achievement that is rare in contemporary American theater. A skillful blend of various styles, plot devices, and comic techniques, *Six Degrees* moves effortlessly between high comedy and searing drama while mimicking the upbeat rhythm of farce. Not surprisingly *Six Degrees* was a major hit for Guare who had been conspicuously absent from the New York stage for over eight years. The play opened off Broadway on June 14, 1990 and later moved to the Vivian Beaumont theater in November of the same year, and was named best new play of the season by the N.Y. Drama Critics Circle.

The title refers to the assertion by the character Ouisa that all members of humanity can be individually traced to each other through a trail of only six other people. How true this is or what it actually means is never made clear in the play, but it does serve as a powerful metaphor for what William Henry III describes as "how closely related people are, yet how distant they feel" (77).

Guare wrote the play based on a widely publicized scheme that was perpetrated on several prosperous Manhattan couples
in 1983. A black teenager from Buffalo, David Hampton, tricked his way into the couples’ homes by feigning being mugged and claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier. He also claimed to be a friend of the victims’ children, all of whom were students at prominent Eastern colleges. David’s motives were unclear since in some of the cases he never stole anything but simply dazzled the families with his charm and erudition in exchange for a family dinner and a good night’s sleep. He was eventually arrested on charges of petty larceny and criminal impersonation and served two years in prison before being paroled in 1986 (Witchel 1990, C17{L}). Guare had a personal connection to this unusual case in that two of his best friends, Osborn Elliot, then dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and Elliot’s wife Inger, were among the victims of Hampton’s elaborate ruse. Guare filed the details of the incident away in his notes and six years later it all came pressing back upon him as a compelling idea for a play:

I had lost touch with the incident, but suddenly, I somehow felt I had to write about it. I bought Sidney Poitier’s autobiography at the Strand and just did it. (Witchel C17)

Guare uses the incident as a mosaic upon which he paints his unique vision of contemporary urban society. He insists however that Six Degrees is not a documentary:

It’s about a group of people telling a story and trying to figure out what happened...I loved it because it’s about celebrity, about creation. It’s so daring. It triggered something that allowed things I’ve been thinking about to coalesce. (Harris 1990, H7)
Nonetheless the incidents in *Six Degrees*, although played at various times as fantasy and dream sequences, parallel in great detail the actual hoax upon which the play is based. For instance both in the play and reality the young black man steals an address book from a college student which he uses as the source for the names and phone numbers of his victims. In the play only the names have changed. In the real life incident Hampton promises to cast his unsuspecting hosts in a film version of the musical *Dreamgirls* to be directed by Mr. Poitier. In the play the lure is the same, the only difference being that the musical is now *Cats*. A third situation Guare borrows from the actual case occurs in the play when the Kittredges discover a male hustler in bed with Paul, the David Hampton based character. Paul apologizes and later sends them flowers. In the real episode the shocked couple are Guare’s friends the Elliots. Inger Elliot’s son describes the actual event:

He went to my parent’s house and before going to sleep asked my mom to wake him early so he could go jogging. The next morning she knocked on his door and found him in bed with a scruffy young man...On his way out he asked to borrow money so he could send them flowers. (Witchel, C17)

There are many other details recreated in the play that lend a realistic flair to those who are familiar with the real story; Paul’s feigning being mugged, his excuse that his thesis was stolen to engender sympathy, his borrowing money from all his victims. What is important is how that attention to detail provides a realistic soil from which the humor is harvested. Guare’s brilliant writing notwithstanding, it
is the incredible brashness of the actual case that lends the play its appeal and in turn endows the characters with rich comic potential. T.G.A. Nelson in a chapter entitled "Reality and Fantasy" (1990) quotes the literary critic Stuart Baker who said, "Comedy can be judged by how well, how profoundly, or how clearly it portrays the real world" (138).

Bergson elaborates on this idea when he writes:

> It is only in its lower aspects, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking contrast to reality; the higher it rises, the more it approximates to life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high-class comedy that the stage might adapt them without changing a single word. (1928, 136)

Guare's triumph is that he is able to magnify to both comic and dramatic effect the visceral and raw power of the real life case. In addition he skillfully weaves thematic elements that recur in other of his plays; deluded self-importance, obsession with celebrity, homophobia, racial tension, homelessness. There are many echoes of these themes in Guare's other highly celebrated comedy, *House of Blue Leaves* (1971), which experienced a major revival on Broadway in 1986. In both works the lead characters (Artie Shaughnessy and Bananas in *House*, and the Kittredges in *Six Degrees*) are self-absorbed, deluded by the empty promises of fame, and disillusioned in their own relationships. The carrot of celebrity that is Artie's ultimate downfall in *House of Blue Leaves* is the same weakness in Ouisa and Flan Kittredge that Paul exploits to his devious ends.
Since this exploitation is at the center of the story just what is it about the situation that makes it ripe for humor? Upon closer examination, Paul’s catering to the Kittredge’s celebrity fantasies is really just an elaborate version of the dignified egotist slipping on the proverbial banana peel. The sophisticated Kittredges (and Paul’s other victims) take themselves all too seriously and along comes a clever con man who trips them up on the flimsiest of vanities:

OUISA: ...Isn’t this the finest time? A toast to you.
GEOFFREY: To Cats!
FLAN: Blunt question. What’s he like?
OUISA: Let’s not be star fuckers.
FLAN: I’m not a star fucker. (30)

Inherent in this situation is the superiority the audience must feel in seeing the Kittredge’s ‘fall’ coming before it actually occurs, and the incongruity within the characters themselves who like Nat in I’m Not Rappaport are too blind to see their greatest weakness. (Admittedly Ouisa subsequently becomes less self-deceptive, a fact which shall be explored later in this chapter.) Paul’s exploitation of his victims thus combines two powerful ingredients in comedy; superiority and incongruity, and in a way that flows naturally from the story as it unfolds, and logically out of character needs and drives.
Closely related to their fascination with celebrity is the characters' obsession with money. The Kittredge's wooing of their rich South African friend Geoffrey is a parody of the worst aspects of American phoniness and greed:

FLAN: The currents last night were very churny.
OUISA: We weren't sucking up. We like Geoffrey.
FLAN: It's the awful thing of having truly rich folk for friends.
FLAN: Only if you let it. The fact of the money shouldn't get in--
OUISA: Having a rich friend is like drowning and your friend makes life boats. But the friend gets very touchy if you say one word: life boat. Well, that's two words. We were afraid our South African friend might say "You only love me for my life boats?" But we like Geoffrey. (8-9)

Guare also utilizes the device of breaking the "fourth wall"; each character in turn speaks to us directly, comments on the action, and makes humorous asides, all of which help to quicken the pace of the play as a whole. Simon uses Eugene as a narrative voice in *Broadway Bound* as well, but in *Six Degrees*, with several characters stepping in and out of that role, their intrusions are abrupt and often unexpected which heighten the humor all the more. As an example Flan Kittredge, a dubious art dealer, is trying to secure a two million dollar investment from their house guest Geoffrey. As much as they want the money, he and his wife Ouisa do not want to come on too strong, as previously shown. The narrative intrusions hilariously reveal their restrained desperation:
GEOFFREY: You have to come to South Africa so I can pay you back....

OUISA: Did you hear--to take back to Johannesburg...[She recites an anecdote]

(They all laugh brightly)

OUISA (To us): We weren't auditioning but I kept thinking Two million dollars two million dollars.

FLAN: (To us): It's like when people say 'Don't think about elephants' and all you can think about is elephants elephants.

OUISA: (To us): Two million dollars two million dollars. (12.13)

The "two million dollars" line becomes a running gag throughout the first half of the play, with Ouisa or Fran addressing the audience directly to remind us they are trying hard not to think of elephants, or simply chanting the phrase in rapid succession, creating a comic mantra.

The "breaking of the fourth wall" technique is used again when Paul, blood stained and beaten, first meets Ouisa and Flan:

PAUL: I'm so sorry to bother you, but I've been hurt and I've lost everything and I didn't know where to go. Your children--I'm a friend of--

OUISA: (To us) And he mentioned our daughter's name.

FLAN: (To us) And the school where they went.

OUISA: (To FLAN) Harvard. You can say Harvard.

FLAN: (To us) We don't want to get into libel....

OUISA: (To us) We bathed him. We did First Aid.

GEOFFREY: (Leaving) It's been wonderful seeing you--

OUISA: (Very cheery) No no no! Stay!---(To us) Two million dollars two million dollars. (14-16)
Nelson in his book *Comedy* (1990) explains the effectiveness of this technique:

Such techniques have come to be described as 'reflexive' or 'metafictional'...it is clear that the comedy of many times and places has successfully exploited techniques for teasing, cajoling, or disorienting readers and auditors, for exchanging back-chat with them, and even for drawing them into the performance. It has played tricks based on illusion; it has made a joke out of the tenuousness of the grasp human beings have on reality...Then too, most of the wide range of metafictional situations (such as a writer or auditor drawn into a fiction, or a character from a film, play, or novel stepping out of it) are inherently incongruous, and thus full of comic potential. (151-152)

Whereas Guare's unique use of narrative devices sets it apart from the other two plays, *Six Degrees* does share with both Simon and Guare richly drawn characters, many of whom are slightly off-center or downright odd. Much of the humor in this play emerges from the pretentiousness of characters such as Geoffrey or Flan, yet they are not above poking fun at their own self-righteousness, a fact which reveals the depth of the characterizations:

FLAN: Geoffrey, you have to move out of South Africa. You'll be killed. Why do you stay in South Africa?

GEOFFREY: One has to stay there to educate the black workers and we'll know we've been successful when they kill us. (10)

Ouisa of the three however has the greater capacity for self-mockery:

OUISA: ...I will come to South Africa and build barricades and lean against them, singing.

PLAN: And the people will follow.

OUISA: "Follow Follow Follow." What's that song?
FLAN: The way Gorbachev cheered on the striking coal miners in the Ukraine....

OUISA: ...The phrase--striking coal miners--I see all these very striking coal miners modelling the fall fashions-- (11-12)

Paul is also quite a unique character, but despite the outlandish deceptions his actions are more shocking than humorous. His unlikely intrusion on the lives of these upper class liberals is the catalyst for the humor, providing the illogical reality base from which the humor emanates. Nelson describes such a character as a "rogue":

'Rogue' is often used in English as a rough translation of the Spanish picaro, which describes someone of low social status who lives on his wits, wanders from place to place, and attains a wide experience of the world. I...use the term fairly loosely to indicate any character who is detached from a settled mode of existence, depends on his wit and ruthlessness for his survival, and perpetrates crimes rather than mere practical jokes. (93)

Nelson views the role of the rogue in literature or drama as that of a "representative of the devil in man". Such a character finds himself fulfilling the role in comedy that the tragic hero does in drama; being at odds with "divine authority." The authority in this case is the establishment, at least the upper middle class version of the establishment. Paul thus represents that diabolical fantasy within all of us to "escape from the normal, rational world" (121). Nelson goes on to describe the secret behind such a character's irresistible appeal:

The technique is simple but effective. Endow your imagined character with as many repulsive characteristics as possible, and then keep saying that he is irresistibly
attractive: the result will be a unique and complex creation. (102)

Paul also serves as a pivotal character who weaves and bobs effortlessly between a delightfully amusing comic world and a tragic one. Late in the play he perpetrates another hoax on a gullible Utah couple, Rick and Elizabeth, conning them out of the remainder of their meager savings. He then talks Rick into a sordid affair, using Elizabeth’s own money to wine and dine him. Friends of the Kittredge’s discover Rick’s body moments later on the street:

KITTY: ...we knew the body had just landed there in that clump.

LARKIN: because the blood seeping out had not reached the gutter yet.

KITTY: You could see the blood just oozing out slowly towards the curb.

LARKIN: The boy had jumped from above. (92)

Such dark elements would derail most comedies. In *Six Degrees* it provides yet another dip in the lightning fast roller coaster ride that Guare treats us to. In fact it is the frenetic pace of the play that most likely prevents the dark elements from overshadowing the comic moments. Recall the idea in Chapter One that “comedy is tragedy speeded up” and we get a sense of how Guare’s rhythmic pacing serves the comedy as a whole.

On the stage *Six Degrees* is performed without an inter­mission and runs only ninety minutes. Guare himself suggests how important the rhythm is to the play’s success. “We used that time of casting to discuss the play, to understand the
rhythm of the play, to hear what the play wanted to be. All I knew about the play was that it had to go like the wind” (Production notes, xi). New York critics almost unanimously praised Six Degrees on its rhythmic, almost lyrical quality. It comes as no surprise that Guare himself is a musician (he wrote the songs used in House of Blue Leaves for instance), and that “his plays,” according to Lloyd Rose “feel like librettos set to some manic melody he can’t get out of his head” (78). This rhythmic pacing (and the humor) is most effectively achieved by the sparse dialogue that punctuates the play. A typical example occurs when the Kittredge’s call the police and they try to justify to the officer why they want Paul arrested:

  KITTY: I think we should call the police.

  (A DETECTIVE appears.)

  DETECTIVE: What are the charges?

  OUISA: He came into our house.

  FLAN: He cooked us dinner.

  OUISA: He told us the story of Catcher in the Rye.

  FLAN: He said he was the son of Sidney Poitier.

  DETECTIVE: Was he?

  OUISA: We don’t know.

  FLAN: We gave him fifty dollars.

  KITTY: We gave him twenty-five.

  LARKIN: Shhhh!

  OUISA: He picked up a hustler.

  FLAN: He left.
KITTY: He chased the burglar out of our house.
OUISA: He didn’t steal anything.
LARKIN: We looked and looked.
KITTY: Top to bottom. Nothing gone.

(THE DETECTIVE closes his notebook.) (58-60)

The duped host and hostesses' children add even more momentum and counterpoint to the humor in this play. All of the children are spoiled rich kids who by their very angry presence remind us how unhappy and alienated the parents really are. The incongruity of Paul being the most likeable of the lot of them is both tragic and funny, especially when Ouisa admits "He did more for us in a few hours then our children ever did" (117). In contrast, the scene in which Flan and Ouisa's son Woody protest the giving away of his pink shirt is hilarious:

WOODY: You gave him my pink shirt? You gave a complete stranger my pink shirt?...I can't believe it. I hate it here. I hate it here. I hate this house. I hate you.

DOUG: You never do anything for me.
TESS: You've never done anything but tried to block me.
BEN: I'm only this pathetic extension of your eighth-rate personality.
DOUG: Social Darwinism pushed beyond all limits.
WOODY: You gave away my pink shirt?
TESS: You want me to be everything you weren't. (74-75)

The presence of the children reveals something very special about the humor in this play. It is more than a mix of styles, metafictional devices, staccato rhythm, and
oddball characters that drives *Six Degrees*. At the heart of
the humor lies a scathing satire about how we have lost touch
with ourselves in the 1990's. As Frank Rich wrote in his
review in the *N.Y. Times* (1990):

...As the action accelerates and the cast of characters
expands, the audience discovers that the Kittredges and
their privileged friends don’t know their alienated
children, that heterosexuals don’t know homosexuals, that
husbands don’t know their wives, that art dealers don’t
know the art they trade for millions....Yet these people
hunger for more as well, for a human connection and
perhaps a spiritual one. It is Paul, of all people, who
points the way, by his words and deeds. (240)

Paul points the way by stressing emphatically the need to
reawaken the "imagination". In a discourse on J.D.
Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, Paul hints at the power the
imagination possesses in rediscovering the self:

**PAUL:** ...I started reading. It’s exactly as I
remembered. Everybody’s a phoney....I finished the
book. It’s a touching story, comic because the boy
wants to do so much and can’t do anything. Hates all
phoniness and only lies to others...

But the aura around this book of Salinger’s...is this:
It mirrors like a fun house mirror and amplifies like a
distorted speaker one of the great tragedies of our
times--the death of the imagination....

I believe the imagination is the passport we create to
take us into the real world...

To face ourselves.

That’s the hard thing.

The imagination.

That’s God’s gift to make the act of self-examination
bearable. (32-34)

What is poignant and ironic about Paul’s monologue is
that while he decries phoniness, he himself is the ultimate
fake, the ultimate phony. Yet there is still stinging truth in what he says. Ouisa rises above the others in recognizing that truth and--using the power of her imagination--begins to reexamine her own life. In doing so she refuses to allow Paul to become a mere "anecdote" to enliven discussion over the dinner table, or to impress her friends:

OUISA: ...How do we fit what happened to us into life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you'll mouth over and over for years to come...And we become these human juke boxes spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we keep the experience? (117-118)

To her credit Ouisa does hold on to the experience. Yet she triumphantly refuses to fall into the trap of sympathizing too strongly with Paul, who after all is still a petty criminal. As Nelson writes:

There is much to tempt us to sympathy with the rogue and harsh trickster, and with the demonic element in comedy: they represent energy which, as Blake said, is eternal delight. But to identify too closely with the rogue is to be tainted with his hubris, his arrogant contempt for his victims and for the law-abiding world in general. (122)

By resisting the temptation to protect Paul from his self-delusions, Ouisa rises above this identification and urges Paul to turn himself in.

PAUL: I'll tell you my name.

OUISA: Please?

PAUL: It's Paul Poitier-Kittredge. It's a hyphenated name.

(Pause)

OUISA: Paul, you need help. Go to the police. Turn yourself in. You'll be over it all the sooner. You can start.
PAUL: Start what?

OUISA: Your life.

PAUL: Will you help me?

(OUISA pauses, and makes a decision)

OUISA: I will help you. But you have to go to the police and go to jail... (108-109)

As Nathan A. Scott Jr. points out, "...comedy often operates by humiliating man and then returning him to his social order all the better for his experience" (see Johnson et al. 1971, 264). Ouisa thus becomes the fulfillment of the best that high comedy has to offer, representing what Corrigan calls the "comic spirit," the turning of a negative experience into a positive one (3). Or as Christopher Fry in Corrigan's book states:

...There is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. (16)

That is not to say that the comic vision completely eclipses the tragic vision in Six Degrees. The majority of the characters are still trapped in their illusions. The very piecemeal structure of Six Degrees hints at the fragmentation in the lives of its characters. Their wholeness has been jeopardized by selling out to materialism, to maintaining the status quo, to impressing their superficial friends, yet the yearning for a meaningful relationship with life remains,
always kept at arm’s length by their own destructive devices. Davey Marlin-Jones offers his perception:

What Guare does as a writer, he gives us wonderful charming pieces of a puzzle. I’m not always sure that they make a picture. There are lots of marvelous increments. I’m not always sure that everything belongs in the same frame...In this play I feel he totally succeeds. And there’s a tough sadness about this play, about what we become, and how our “good intentions” have corrupted us in a way that our corruption hasn’t. And so I find this piece very sad, and funny, and maybe the reason I find it so funny, is because of the pain of its treatment. (Interview 1992)

The two-sided Kandinsky painting hanging over the set, as several critics have pointed out, serves as a metaphor for all of the dualistic elements at work in this play; the tragic and the comic; the real and imagined; the dupe and the duped; as well as the contradictions within the characters themselves. It is Paul, the antagonist, who exploits the gap between what is preached and ultimately practiced by the main characters. Yet ironically it is also the dualism within Paul that allows a more sympathetic perception of him by an audience. As Clive Barnes (1990) states, “We sometimes--and there are two sides to every picture--like, envy and even admire glorious fakes. And we can feel a kinship to their fakery” (244).

By making Paul a sympathetic villain the play never slips into mere melodrama. The various dualities at work in Six Degrees are allowed to discordantly co-exist creating tensions which are released through the laughter. Guare defined this dualistic vision and how it applies to the tension of living in modern day New York in a 1990 interview:
My concerns are about the imagination and how we live in this city. We can't go on living like this, where the ideals are so high and the opposite of what ideals are, the bedrock, is so weak. (Harris, H7)

Guare's achievement is that in *Six Degrees* the characters tightrope walk precariously between the tragic and the comic, revealing the disparity between liberal white idealism and urban reality, yet never wholly upsetting the delicate balance. In modern day terms, when stage comedies are almost required to serve demanding audiences healthy doses of realism—i.e. confront serious societal issues and still be funny—*Six Degrees of Separation* is the perfect play. As Nelson appropriately writes:

...We enjoy the idea of tricking others, but we are never quite immune from the fear of being tricked ourselves: we enjoy laughing at others, but we know what it is to be laughed at. Above all, we find it disturbingly easy to imagine being written off as mad in a world which is only dubiously sane. (122)
CHAPTER FIVE

SYNTHESIS

The three plays considered in this study appear to be widely divergent in several fundamental ways. In terms of both form and style they utilize quite a range of varying elements. Themetically the three plays embrace a variety of issues including the plight of the elderly, the breakdown of the family, and the schism in our collective consciousness. Yet surprisingly this trio of comedies also possess a great deal in common in terms of both the playwrights' similar approaches to their humor and specific comedic elements.

We need first to consider the similarities among the playwrights to fully appreciate these shared elements. The cultural milieu that produced these playwrights strongly influences their work. The most striking similarity in their backgrounds is that all three playwrights are the products of Northeast urban America, and all show evidence in their works of a passionate concern with the plight of America's cities. In fact all three plays share a New York City setting. Even Broadway Bound which is set in Brighton Beach circa 1945 is written with a narrative perspective of looking back from the present day and commenting on past events. Thus these comedies are reflections of the various problems ranging from
apathy and isolation to economic despair and homelessness that confront the majority of American urban dwellers today.

Gardner, Simon, and Guare are also products of the same generation. In fact there is less than a decade’s difference between them in ages (Gardner, born 1935; Simon, 1927; Guare, 1938); consequently they all lived through the same cultural milestones: the aftermath of the Depression, World War II, the McCarthy era, Vietnam, and Watergate, to name a few.

The most striking similarity between these writers, however (beyond their obvious success), is their refusal to write comedies that can be easily pigeonholed into predictable comedic formulae. Consider the difficulty other writers have in categorizing their work:

...Though Gardner attests that in all his plays he intends to write comedy, the result is a mix of seriousness and humor, sometimes perplexing to critics and audiences. (see Review, 208)

_Broadway Bound_ is not a farce, is not really a comedy. It is more properly speaking a memory play, much more like _The Glass Menagerie_ than _Barefoot in the Park._ (Barnes, 118)

The chaotic style of comedy that Mr. Guare writes--call it paranoid realism--has also been echoed in younger playwrights’ work. (Harris, H7)

It would be presumptuous to conclude that these playwrights are simply writing in complex comedic forms to meet the needs of today’s sophisticated marketplace. To the contrary, it seems clear that all three authors write socially relevant plays primarily out of a pressing need to say something viable. (After all both Simon and Gardner gave up successful enterprises early in their careers to write for
the stage.) It might also be more accurate to assert that all three playwrights who have matured through the same generational crises have similar visions of a decaying social fabric. Although they all can lay claim to observing the world with a distorted comic vision, the world they are commenting upon is itself distorted which tends to color their humor with the darker hues of inhumanity and tragedy. Gardner recalls the poignant memories that inspire his writing:

...There were these cafeterias, and these guys in berets and goatees would sit and yell about Trotsky, and about wars long since fought that were vivid to them. I remember these guys hollering---and caring that much, still. Against all evidence to the contrary, they had not given up an image of a better world. (Bennetts, H17)

This passion to speak out against the ills that plague our society lends a transpersonal quality to each of the authors’ respective works. Even Simon’s *Broadway Bound* which is clearly semi-autobiographical has been praised for its lack of author self-indulgence:

What’s most impressive about Broadway Bound is Mr. Simon’s expanded generosity toward characters who are not himself. Eugene...is not the protagonist of this play. (Rich, 112)

A passion for issues that transcend personal concerns is evident in responses the authors have made concerning the craft of writing comedy:

[Gardner]: You sometimes feel that the people who are writing the sitcoms have stopped having a real life of any kind. They’re now basing the characters on other characters in other situation comedies...

(Guernsey Jr., 380)
[Simon]: I continue to learn the craft. In my later plays I began to provide a background, a context for the material. *Brighton* was set against the Depression... *Biloxi* against World War II; and *Broadway Bound* is set in the midst of the war between my mother and father. (Wilson, 116)

[Guare]: ...It seems we live in a world where amnesia is the most wished for state. When did history become a bad word? It’s extraordinary, our need to move on at all costs and not ask what happened. Life just passes through us. I don’t want life to just pass through me. (Harris, H7)

The most impressive similarity between the authors for our purposes is that all three felt unusually compelled to write the particular comedies considered in this thesis. For Gardner the impetus was in seeing two oldsters on a park bench which gave vent to all the passionate socialist rhetoric he remembered as a youth. For Simon, *Broadway Bound* was the fulfillment of a childhood fantasy to one day pay tribute to his humble roots. For Guare, a real life incident served as a catalyst for releasing other ideas which had not yet found expression. It seems more than coincidence that each play began with a compelling seminal idea and in turn became for each author one of their biggest Broadway hits. This suggests that a strong correlation may exist between great dramatic/comedic works and the power within the seeds of inspiration that give these works life.

Perhaps that same passion behind each respective work is the reason each play contains such vivid and memorable characters. Even though each playwright uses a variety of comic devices, those devices are almost always applied in relation to character. In fact none of the playwrights rely very heavily on plot development or snappy one-liners for the
humor. (Even Simon's typically liberal use of jokes is considerably more judicious in *Broadway Bound* than in earlier works.) Whether it is the innocent exuberance of the young Eugene, the crusty feistiness of Nat, or the daring chutzpah of Paul, each protagonist possesses exaggerated qualities that pit them against the larger world around them. In each case, these characters are incapable of true social conformity; in fact their futile attempts at conforming produce the type of eccentric adjustment that often results in humor. Davey Marlin-Jones offers further analysis on the common ground shared by the plays main characters:

> I think all three [plays] are about "I've been invited to this party and I don't have the credentials to stay." Now one is because I want to be a great comedy writer, and no great comedy can possibly come out of the Bronx... That literally Central Park... has become a battle zone and there is no place the elderly can peacefully rest, so that we don't belong here anymore.
> And in *Six Degrees the characters operate under the Post-war myth that*... if you continue to build the family fortune, and marry right and go to the right schools everything will be fine, and I did everything [I was] told and life is hell...
> Each one prescribed to a set of values that for some reason is not applying to them and their daily needs at this time. (Interview, 1992)

If comedy primarily emanating from character was the norm, it would hardly seem worthy of note. There are of course several major comedies that rely on totally different elements for their comic effect. Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* relies heavily on word play, witticisms and turns of phrases for the humor. Other plays such as Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (1983) or even Simon's *Rumors* (1988) generate laughs based on farcical elements such
as unbelievable coincidences, surprise elements, and plot twists. That the comedies in this thesis base their humor primarily in character development does not necessarily guarantee critical and economic success, but it does demand that the characters be well rounded and credible, despite their exaggerated natures. That credibility in turn allows the humor to flow naturally from character needs and drives.

Closely related to the viability of the characters, a second distinction common to these works is the believable reality base that each shares. Each play would still be effective theater if it were possible to eliminate the humorous elements. As Corrigan writes, "The comic has become a transparency through which we see to the serious. Comedy is unquestionably the proper mirror of our times" (11). That mirror becomes a clear reflection in these works, unmuddied by frivolous jokes, or irrelevant asides. With few exceptions the major New York critics did not criticize the humor in these plays as being forced, or for containing laugh lines that were author imposed. As discussed in Chapter Three, even Simon who had a reputation for such gimmicky dialogue was applauded in Broadway Bound for avoiding it. As Mark Twain said late in his career regarding his own work: "If the humor came of its own accord and uninvited, I have allowed it a place in my sermon, but I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor" (Enck et al. 1960, 108). Gardner says much the same thing when he admits, "If the jokes didn't need the play the audience wouldn't laugh as much" (Guernsey Jr.
And Simon echoes similar sentiments when he confesses:

Mike [Nichols] would point out wisely, "This play should work if we don't get a single laugh all night. They should still be interested in the characters. If they laugh, fine." So he never treats the play as a comedy. (Guernsey Jr., 112)

A third ingredient shared by the trio of comedies are endings which do not neatly and conveniently wrap up all the loose ends. In remaining true to the real world these plays refuse to conform to the traditional happy endings that typify classical comedy. Nelson elaborates:

If laughter is essential to comedy, the yearning for harmony and reconciliation is equally so. Yet the endings of comedies, especially modern comedies, seldom achieve what Pynchon would term 'clear happiness or redeeming cataclysm'. Perhaps, then, the most honest ending is that which simply returns us to the inadequacies of the world, ...to the awareness that life is a struggle in which nobody can always be on the winning side, and where each of us will sometimes fill the role of victim, scapegoat, or fool. (186)

That does not mean each play ends devoid of hope. But it does suggest that the plays' heroes must still cope with the same societal and personal problems that thwarted their happiness in the first place. We are not left with an image of Nat and Midge as senile oldsters, but Nat will most likely continue to cause himself grief with his zany impersonations because that is his way of survival in a still hostile world. Of course we all know what becomes of Eugene, but as Frank Rich (1983) points out there is a price Simon pays for success:

Broadway Bound shows us its hero as he prepares to break into comedy writing on radio in the late 1940's, but not before he learns that life, unlike the movies,
doesn’t always come to a clear-cut, let alone happy finale. (B3)

Even Ouisa, the most hopeful of all the characters, is still left with a questionable marriage, ungrateful children, and at her stage in life an uphill climb toward any lasting transformation.

Despite the negatives the amazing power of comedy is that it allows one to take all the bad news of life with a renewed sense of empowerment. In each of these works there remains an encouraging tone amidst all the gloom and angst. It is not really what becomes of the characters that is essential, because after all they are fictional. Perhaps the power of great comedy lies in its attempt to restore in us the ability to take ourselves not quite so seriously, to view the world with a new perspective, and to persevere in an often confusing, uncaring world. The most vital element these three plays share is a comic vision that bestows that power:

The humorist knows that you are tired, wicked, afraid, frazzled and desperately alone. He tells you a funny story about all that because he means to give you power over your menaces.

For your part, you know that within his riffs and turns of phrases he is furious at the world’s crookedness, cruelty, shabbiness and cant, that he uses funny material to save himself as well as you. (Rosenblatt 1991, H5)

The original impetus for this entire project was an attempt to understand the mechanism of jokes and various comic techniques and how these contributed to the success of a humorous dramatic work. I must confess that before embarking on this project my personal bias was that these
particular impressive works would contain keys to unlocking the secret mysteries of laughter; that in closely analyzing a play, one could understand the magic that pervades the work as a whole. I discovered a reverse of that process is much more valuable. When one can appreciate an entire comedic work and how it works as a complete piece of theater, one can better understand why the jokes do or do not serve the whole. While I always knew that context, structure, and rhythm were all necessary components to humor, it is now abundantly clear that a great comedy begins first with an imperative to write, contains many of the same elements of great drama, and adds to the equation the additional ingredient of a comic 'perspective.' Director Mike Nichols summarizes these essentials:

When you have an idea that permits, that forces, that makes it necessary for something to happen, then you have an idea for a play. You can have the greatest lines, the greatest gags, the most beautiful language in the world—it makes no difference if it isn’t set up, if there isn’t a kind of tripod in the situation that holds...the camera that is the play. (Guernsey Jr., 107)

Knowledge of technique, an historical understanding of the roots of comedy, and a grasp of the main theories of humor while worthy of note, are not the essential ingredients in writing a comedy. It is first and foremost the perception of humor in the most mundane aspects of everyday life that endows a sound playwright with the ability to write plays that reflect that humor. In regards to that highly specialized task I’m convinced that it is impossible to learn such a thing. The writing of comedy depends primarily on the pos-
session of the unique gift of a comic viewpoint; a talent which Gardner, Simon, and Guare possess in abundance:

Gardner: All of us here [a group of other playwrights] have some sense of absurdness ...We have a useful schizophrenia, we've found a way to take what might have appeared to be imbalance if we hadn't become writers and make it work for us in some creative jiu-jitsu fashion. What was painful becomes funny, and what we'd like to go and see in the theater is what we write.
(Guernsey Jr., 371)

This comic perspective on life goes by many names. Peter Monahon refers to it as the “comic vision”, Corrigan calls it the “comic spirit”, yet it essentially represents that same ephemeral quality evident in all great works of humor. There is an enduring force within all of humanity that impels us to attempt to make sense of the often frustrating, illogical, and hostile elements in the world in which we live. The comic perspective is that ability to stand back with bemused detachment to observe our own incongruous and often futile adjustments to those negative elements of life. That comic vision enables the creators of I’m Not Rappaport, Broadway Bound, and Six Degrees of Separation the ability to transform dramatic dross into comedic gold.
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