

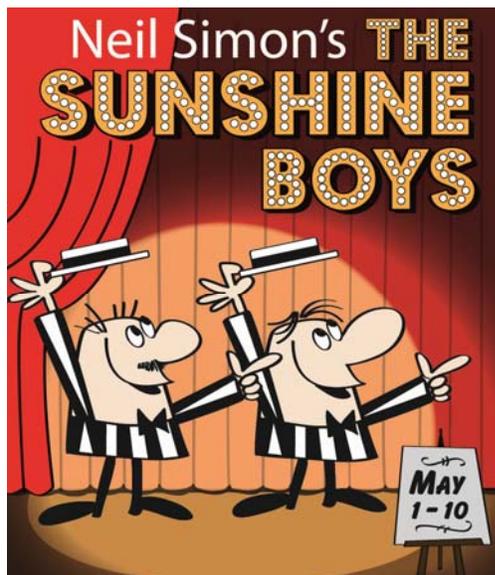


THE SUNSHINE BOYS

By Neil Simon

A Study Guide by Samuel Myers

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The Sunshine Boys by Neil Simon

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A Study Guide by Samuel Myers Bates College '16

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I. THE PLAYWRIGHT

Neil Simon is America's best-known living playwright, and possibly the most financially successful dramatist of all time. Beginning with *Come Blow Your Horn* in 1961, Simon has written a long succession of Broadway hit comedies which have earned him huge audiences and numerous prizes, including four Tony Awards, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. In 1966, Simon had four plays running simultaneously on Broadway, the only author in modern times to accomplish such a feat.

Among his better known plays are *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), *The Odd Couple* (1965), *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* (1971), *Broadway Bound* (1986), and *Lost in Yonkers* (1991).

In addition to his work for the stage, Simon has written the screenplays for more than twenty movies—many of which have been adaptations of his own plays—and has won Emmy Awards for his writing for such television comedians as Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, Jackie Gleason, and Jerry Lewis.

Simon's life is a textbook case of the American success story. The grandson of Jewish immigrants and the second of two sons, Simon was born into a lower-middle class family

in The Bronx in 1927. His father, Irving, was a salesman in the garment industry, and his mother, Mamie, was a housewife. Life in the Simon family during the Depression years of the 1930s was marked by frequent troubles, emotional and financial, caused by Irving's periodic abandonment of his wife and children. Left to fend for themselves, the family took in lodgers, providing room and board for strangers in order to make up for the lost income of the absent father.

Simon found escape from his family woes at the movies, especially in the films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy. It was the exhilaration and solace provided by these comedians that pointed Simon toward his ultimate goal as a playwright, which he has defined as the desire "to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out." His early exposure to these highly physical comedians inspired in him a lifelong passion for vaudeville, which he made manifest in *The Sunshine Boys*. Inspiration for the archetypical vaudevillian duo at the center of *The Sunshine Boys* came from two real-life vaudeville teams: "Smith and Dale" and "Gallagher and Shean."

The road to that goal led through DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, from which Simon graduated in 1943 at age sixteen. Following his high school years he went to work in the garment district in New York, employed, in his words, in "lifting heavy things." In 1945, toward the end of World War II, Simon left the garment business and entered the Army Air Force, spending a year and a half in Biloxi, Mississippi and Denver, Colorado. As part of his training for the Air Force, Simon attended a training program at New York University. His year studying engineering at NYU constitutes the only higher education Simon ever received. He has often felt embarrassed by his lack of a college degree, especially in a field populated by highly-educated writers and artists—a situation he compares to "being in a room where everybody speaks French but you."

In 1946, Simon went to work in the mailroom of the New York office of Warner Brothers, a major Hollywood studio, joining his older brother, Danny, who was employed there in the publicity department. By this time, Neil and Danny had begun working together as a comedy writing team, creating sketches for amateur performances put on by employees of a New York department store. On the alert for professional opportunities, they learned that a well-known producer at CBS, Goodman Ace, was scouting new comedy-writing talent. They presented themselves to Ace, who challenged them to produce a sketch funny enough to be broadcast on one of CBS's successful radio programs. In response, they created a monologue by an imaginary Brooklyn usherette describing Joan Crawford in a typical Hollywood tearjerker: "She's in love with a gangster who is caught and sent to Sing Sing and given the electric chair and she promises to wait for him." The sketch was a hit with Ace, and the Simon brothers were put to work writing for Robert Q. Lewis, a major radio personality who was later to become a success in the early years of television.

Neil and Danny continued working together in radio and television, while also writing material for musical reviews on Broadway and at resort hotels in the Catskill Mountains, known as the "Borscht Circuit." (Borscht is a kind of soup made from beefstock and beets which was popular among the mostly Jewish patrons of these hotels.) By 1956, Danny decided to move to California to pursue a career as a director. Neil remained in New York, writing for "Your Show of Shows," a weekly comedy review starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Cocoa that has come to be recognized as a classic of television's "golden age."

In 1958, Simon started working on the script that was to become his first full-length play, *Come Blow Your Horn*. Produced finally in 1961, the play contains a strong autobiographical element. "I knew that you should write about what you know," Simon has said of this play. "I figured, OK, I know my family, so I'll do something about how my older brother Danny and I left home and took our first apartment."

Later plays by Simon have also employed autobiographical themes and situations. Following the death of his first wife, Joan, and his remarriage to the actress, Marsha Mason, Simon wrote *Chapter Two* (1977), a play that deals with the problems of beginning a new life with a different mate. Starting in the mid-eighties, he embarked on what was to become a series of self-portraits focusing on the crucial problems and events of his life. *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983) looks back at family tensions during the Depression, while *Broadway Bound* (1986) examines a major turning point in the life of a young writer who bears a strong resemblance to Neil Simon. *Biloxi Blues* (1985) deals with the playwright's life in the military, while *Jake's Women* (1992) once again grapples with the difficulty of accepting his first wife's death. Simon explores the experiences of his early professional life in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1993) which recaptures the hilarity of his years as a writer for Sid Caesar.

II. THE SETTING

The first act is set in "a two-room apartment in an old hotel on upper Broadway in the mid-eighties." This is Willie's apartment, where Willie spends every hour of every day watching television and drinking tea. Simon specifies the apartment's location in Manhattan because *The Sunshine Boys* is, in part, a play about New York City. The constant updating, revamping, and reinventing which characterize Manhattan real estate also characterize the fickle New York entertainment industry. While Willie has retained his outdated vaudeville mentality in a world now dominated by film and television, he has also remained firmly planted in his shabby little apartment while the now-fashionable Upper West Side has grown up around him.

The beginning of Act Two takes place on "an obvious stage 'flat' representation of a doctor's office." This is the set for Willie and Al's performance on the special CBS variety show. In Act One, Willie's nephew Ben asks Al if there's anything he needs for the special, and Al lists the many props that the so-called "doctor sketch" requires. When Act Two arrives, we see all of these props put into use as Willie and Al rehearse the sketch. The second half of Act Two returns to Willie's apartment.

III. THE PLOT

The play is divided into two acts, with each act split roughly down the middle into two long scenes. Willie Clark, the protagonist, is on stage for the duration of the show. Three of the play's four scenes are set in Willie's apartment, while one is set in a CBS studio. The play's structure is simple and elegant: Act One, Scene One introduces a major disturbance in Willie's monotonous life and sets up a clear objective; Act One, Scene Two presents action taken in pursuit of that objective, with numerous obstacles along the way; Act Two, Scene One builds up to the climactic moment at which the objective becomes completely unattainable; and Act Two, Scene Two is a classic *dénouement*, a scene of reconciliation and resolution. Because this is a comedy, Willie is happier at the end of the play than he is at the beginning.

And Willie is quite evidently unhappy at the beginning. When we are introduced to him, he is dozing off to a daytime soap opera, waiting for his tea kettle to come to a boil. We see Willie doing what he does every day, and we see that it is a wholly unsatisfying existence. He makes tea. He watches television. He sleeps. There's no challenge, no excitement, only infinite sameness and the slow, ceaseless passing of time. Willie is completely stagnant. He's become far too passive to seek out the company of other people, so he relies on his television, using it as a stand-in for real human interaction. When Willie accidentally unplugs the TV with his foot, the stage directions give us a glimpse into his thoughts: "*How could his best friend desert him at a time like this?*" The TV is at the center of Willie's life.

Willie's nephew Ben arrives, as he does every Wednesday. Ben brings a bag of groceries and a copy of the weekly *Variety* for his elderly uncle. He even sneaks Willie a couple of cigars despite the fact that Willie's doctor has forbidden them. Willie asks Ben how his children are doing. Ben replies that they're doing well. Willie asks if the children know who he is, and Ben responds thus: "That you were a big star in vaudeville? They're three years old, Uncle Willie, you think they remember vaudeville? *I never saw vaudeville.*" In this exchange, we learn that Willie is proud of his fame as a former vaudeville performer. We also learn that he's quite unaware of the way people view him; not as a current celebrity, but as a kind of historic artifact, a remnant of an archaic genre of live entertainment.

Willie asks Ben if there's been any word about potential employment. Ben is not only his nephew, but also his agent. It turns out that Willie has developed a reputation for being unable to memorize lines (due to his old age), and nobody in New York wants to hire him. Willie is sincerely disappointed by this news, as he's eager for an opportunity to perform.

Ben reveals that CBS is doing a variety show spanning the history of comedy, "dating from the early Greek times, through the days of Vaudeville right up to today's stars." He says that CBS begged him to get Willie to perform on the show with his former vaudeville partner, Al Lewis. Their legendary act—called "Lewis and Clark" or, occasionally, "The Sunshine Boys"—is a vital part of the history of comedy in the United States. Willie refuses Ben's offer outright.

Willie gives two primary reasons for refusing to work with Al: first, Al used to poke Willie in the chest with his finger, and second, Al used to spit in Willie's face when he spoke. After 43 years of performing with Al, Willie grew to despise these two insignificant mannerisms. Willie explains that he hasn't spoken to Al in twelve years, including one year when they were still working together. Eleven years ago, Al retired before Willie was ready to retire, leaving Willie without a partner and effectively forcing him to give up doing what he loved to do. Since then, Al has reached out to Willie on numerous occasions, but Willie has always ignored him.

Willie protests the variety show adamantly, but he is obviously excited by the prospect of working again. Eventually, Ben convinces him that it's a good idea. Ben calls Al on the phone and tells him that Willie has agreed to do the variety show. They schedule a rehearsal on Monday at eleven o' clock in Willie's apartment.

Monday arrives, and Ben shows up at Willie's apartment a few minutes before eleven to ensure that Willie doesn't try to worm his way out of rehearsing with Al. Indeed, Willie has gotten cold feet. He makes up all kinds of excuses, trying desperately to convince Ben that they should call off the meeting. Ben insists that they go through with it. Finally, Al arrives. A clearly anxious Willie immediately retreats to the kitchen to make some tea, leaving Ben to entertain Al.

After jotting down a list of props that Al requests for the show, Ben leaves the apartment. Before he goes, he expresses his heartfelt gratitude to Al:

“Mr. Lewis, I can't express to you enough how happy I am and speaking for the millions of young people in this country who never had the opportunity of seeing Lewis and Clark work, I just want to say “thank you.””

Once Ben is gone, Al and Willie hesitantly start a conversation. Al talks about how happy he is living in New Jersey with his daughter. Willie asserts that he could never live in New Jersey because he needs the excitement of the city—an ironic statement, considering his lifestyle. After chatting for a bit, the two men decide to start rehearsing the sketch that they'll be performing for the variety show. It's one of their most famous sketches. They call it simply “the doctor sketch.”

The rehearsal brings out all of the pent-up frustration that's been welling up inside of Willie and Al for the past twelve years. They bicker and argue about every detail of the doctor sketch. When Al's character makes his entrance, he knocks on the door of the doctor's office; Willie's character is supposed to say “Come-in!” Instead, Willie decides to change the line to “Enter.” This arbitrary decision drives Al up the wall. Act One ends with Al running for the door, screaming “LUNATIC BASTARD,” and Willie screaming back, “ENNN-TERRRR!”

Act Two begins with an impatient conversation between the TV Director (on loudspeaker), the Assistant Director Eddie, and Ben. We're no longer in Willie's apartment; we're in a studio at CBS, set up to resemble a doctor's office. Everyone's preparing for a run-through of the doctor sketch with Willie and Al. An announcer introduces the act:

“The golden age of comedy reached its zenith during a fabulous and glorious era known as Vaudeville... Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Eddie Cantor, Ed Wynn, Will Rogers and a host of other greats fill its Hall of Fame... There are two other names that belong on this list, but they can never be listed separately... They are more than a team... They are two comic shining lights that beam as one... For Lewis without Clark is like laughter without joy... We are privileged to present tonight, in their first public performance in over eleven years, for half a century known as the “Sunshine Boys,” Mr. Al Lewis and Mr. Willie Clark, in their beloved scene... “The Doctor Will See You Now.””

Willie and Al proceed to perform the sketch. It goes smoothly until Al starts spitting in Willie's face. Willie stops the rehearsal to complain to the director; Al claims that he isn't doing it on purpose, he can't help that he sometimes spits when he speaks. The director encourages them to keep moving because they have limited time. Willie reluctantly agrees to continue the sketch. A few lines later, Al pokes Willie in the chest with his finger. At this point, Willie loses it. He starts screaming at Al. The Assistant Director tries

to calm him down, but it's too late for that. Al leaves the set. Willie continues to rant and rave until he has a heart attack. He clutches his chest and Ben rushes to his side.

In the next scene, Willie is back in his apartment, propped up in his bed. There's a nurse with him. Willie tries to get a rise out of the nurse. She doesn't bite. Ben arrives at the apartment with the most recent edition of *Variety*. He tells the nurse that she can take a break, so she goes out, leaving Ben and Willie alone.

Ben tells Willie that he has to retire from show business due to his poor health. Willie doesn't take this news well. Ben gives Willie two options: he can either move in with Ben and his family, or he can go and live at the Actors' Home in New Brunswick. Willie agrees to go to the Actors' Home, but he's worried that he won't see Ben anymore. Ben assures him that he'll still visit every week. Ben notes that this is the first time Willie has ever treated him like a nephew instead of an agent.

Ben asks Willie if he'd be open to allowing Al to visit him. Predictably, Willie says no. Ben doesn't accept this answer. He says, "Uncle Willie, I've never asked you to do a personal favor for me as long as I've known you... But this is important... For me, and for you, for Al Lewis." Willie agrees to let Al come and say 'hello.' Ben reveals that Al is already in the apartment building; he calls down to the front desk and asks them to send Al up to Willie's room.

Al arrives. Ben leaves Al and Willie to talk. Al sort of apologizes to Willie, and Willie sort of accepts the apology. They're both much too stubborn to talk earnestly about their feelings. In the end, Al says simply, "You know something, Willie. I don't think we get along too good." The two men grudgingly reconcile their differences, finding some semblance of peace at last.

Willie's inability to achieve the objective he originally set out to achieve—namely, performing in a CBS variety show with his old vaudeville partner—ultimately allows him to achieve a different, more personal objective. He's finally learned to accept Al for who he is. When all is said and done, Willie might not have gotten what he wanted, but he got what he *needed*, and he is a better person for it.

III. THE CHARACTERS

The plot of *The Sunshine Boys* is centered around three people:

1. Willie Clark

When the play begins, Willie is in his 70's. He's an aging vaudeville star who lives alone and spends all of his time watching television. He was married once, but his wife passed away. Willie is defined by his stubbornness. He is fiercely independent; he likes to be in control and he hates to be proved wrong. Growing old has been difficult for him because old age brings with it a steady loss of autonomy, and he can't stand the thought of relying on other people for anything. When Willie is confined to his bed after a heart attack, his nurse makes this observation about him: "Can't stand to have people do things for you, can you?"

Willie is a performer at heart. He delights in wordplay and witty turns-of-phrase. He regularly undermines the people around him by taking their statements out of context, poking fun at their insecurities, and refusing to acquiesce to their simplest requests. Put simply, he enjoys being difficult; he likes to give people a hard time.

Willie was successful in vaudeville because he worked hard at the craft of comedy. He's a generally irreverent and disrespectful person, but he has enormous respect for talented performers. Though he spends the entire play complaining about Al Lewis, he maintains that Al is the best comedian in the business. It's this abiding respect for talent that kept Willie by Al's side for so many years. Al says this of Willie: "You know what your trouble was, Willie? You always took the jokes too seriously. They were just jokes. We did comedy on stage for 43 years, I don't think you enjoyed it once." And Willie says, "If I was there to enjoy it, I would buy a ticket."

Despite his professed independence, Willie is quite reliant on his nephew Ben for support and companionship. Willie constantly pokes and prods at Ben, but he obviously looks forward to Ben's weekly visits. He becomes genuinely worried when he finds out that he'll be moving to the Actor's Home because he thinks he won't be able to see Ben anymore. Willie isn't one to express affection, but he is certainly capable of feeling it.

2. Al Lewis

The other half of "Lewis and Clarke," Al is also a former vaudeville star who is now in his 70's. Like Willie, Al was once married, but his wife is no longer living. At the beginning of the play, Al seems to have come to terms with his old age in a way that Willie has not. While Willie is still determined to live alone in his depressing Manhattan apartment, Al has already moved in with his daughter who lives in the country. While Willie is constantly trying to find work in commercials, Al has already retired from show business. Al acknowledges and enjoys that he has a simple life—he loves the peace and quiet and open space of the country. Willie comments that Al has always been drawn to a more relaxed, laid-back lifestyle. He says of Al: "You can sit on a porch, look at a tree, watch a bush growing... you're not still active like me. You got a different temperament, you're a slow person." Willie's life is, of course, just as slow as Al's, but he doesn't acknowledge that.

3. Ben Silverman

Ben is Willie's nephew and agent. He is married with two children, a daughter (Amanda) and a son (Michael). Though he's a busy professional in his 30's, he has chosen to take on the responsibility of caring for his elderly uncle. Ben is a kind, selfless person who expresses himself candidly. He's extremely sincere, and he becomes easily frustrated with his uncle's brand of humor.

V. THEMES

Most of the important themes of the play have been touched on previously. The central themes include coming to terms with old age and learning to accept others for who they are.

VI. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does Willie's behavior in the opening moments of the show (before Ben arrives) tell us about his mental state? Is he happy?
2. How does Willie treat Ben? How do you think Willie actually feels about Ben?
3. Why does Willie ultimately agree to do the variety show? Does he do it for Ben? For Al? Or for purely selfish reasons?
4. Why does Willie get up to make tea when Al first enters the apartment?
5. How does Al's relationship with his daughter compare to Willie's relationship with Ben?
6. Willie says, "I like a busy life. That's why I love the city. I gotta be near a phone." Why is business so important to Willie? Why is he so afraid of leaving the city?
7. Are there any familiar patterns or qualities in the doctor sketch that remind you of dialogue in other parts of the play? Does Willie treat life like a vaudeville routine?
8. Why does Willie keep repeating "Frito-Lays" when he has a heart attack? Why is that phrase so important to him?
9. After Willie has a heart attack, his nurse points out that he can't stand to have other people do things for him. Is she right? At what moments in the play is this evident?
10. At the end of the play, Ben says to Willie, "You know, this is the first moment since I've known you, that you've treated me like a nephew and not an agent." What does he mean by that?