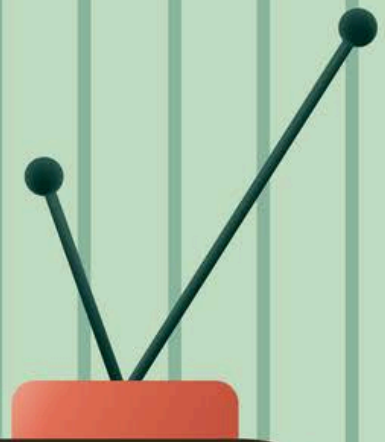
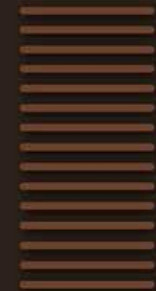


LE PETIT THEATRE
—* presents *—



LAUGHTER ON * THE 23RD FLOOR



BY NEIL SIMON



EDUCATION GUIDE



WHAT TO EXPECT AT LE PETIT THEATRE

HISTORY

New Orleans' most historic playhouse, Le Petit Théâtre Du Vieux Carré, has played an important role in our nation's theatrical history since 1916. Located just off of Jackson Square in the French Quarter, we have called our current stage at 616 St. Peter Street home since 1922.

Since moving into its current home in 1922, Le Petit has entertained thousands of audience members in a wide array of dramas, comedies, and musicals. First conceived as a community theatre, and later grown into a professional venue, hundreds of actors, designers, directors, and technicians, both locally and nationally, have shared their talents to make Le Petit a true shining star in the theatrical world.

THIS SHOW

It is 1953, and the writers of The Max Prince Show have one job: make America laugh. Inside a chaotic writers' room high above New York City, a group of brilliant, competitive, and wildly different comedy writers race to create enough jokes, sketches, and punchlines to fill the next live television broadcast. At the center of it all is Max Prince, the show's larger-than-life star, whose demands, moods, and enormous personality keep the writers constantly scrambling. But the laughter isn't always easy.

Inspired by playwright Neil Simon's own experiences as a young writer on Sid Caesar's legendary television program Your Show of Shows, Laughter on the 23rd Floor is a fast-paced comedy about friendship, ambition, creativity, and the complicated business of making people laugh.

ARRIVING & DEPARTING

Once you arrive at Le Petit, one of our staff members will greet your group leader in the lobby and lead you to your seats. Please be certain to make sure to fill in every seat, as our student performances are very often completely full. The show will run approximately 90 minutes without an intermission. So make sure to run to the restroom before we begin so you don't miss anything. The restrooms at Le Petit are shared with Tableau, our neighbor restaurant, and located in the shared courtyard between the two businesses.

After the performance has ended (and following your rousing ovation), your group leader can lead you back into the lobby where you can exit the theater. If you wish to greet some of the cast members or take your photo up on our stage, just be sure to let a staff member know. We are very happy to oblige any reasonable request to make your time at Le Petit a memorable one.



HOW TO SHOW UP

We are so excited to host you at our student matinee, and we hope you are excited to see our show! Attending a live piece of theatre or music is a wonderfully unique experience because you get to share the same space with both the performers on stage and your fellow audience members for a couple of hours. Even though the audience section is darkened for lighting purposes, EVERYONE can see and hear one another; Actors can see and hear you, and you can see and hear them! The communication is much more direct than watching a video or listening to something with your headphones. And that is what makes it special.

So in order for you to have the most exciting and engaging experience possible, we highly recommend the following:

UNPLUG! - Turn those phones and devices off and escape the electronic world for a couple hours. Taking that kind of break is great for your mental health and will also help you tune into the story in front of you.

REACT! - If you enjoy what you see and hear, let the artists know it! We love to hear your natural reactions, such as laughter and applause. It lets us know you are there with us and it helps feed the actors' energy.

RESPECT! - Make sure to keep the show up on the stage. Resist the urge to draw attention to yourself by talking or looking at your phone. The actors can all see and hear those things, and it probably is annoying to those around you.

EMBRACE! - Theatre, by its nature is designed to challenge, to educate, to provoke, and to engage. That means you may see and hear things that are outside of your comfort zone or beyond your current understanding. You may see characters do things and express ideas that challenge your present perception of the world, or you may see a reflection of the world just as you see it. Either way is a welcome experience! We just ask that you keep an open mind and an open heart to what you see and hear. We hope whatever you experience provokes thoughts and feelings within you. That is why we tell stories on stage after all.

We can't wait to see you soon!



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: Neil Simon



Biography

Neil Simon (1927–2018) was one of the most successful American playwrights and screenwriters of the twentieth century. Over the course of his career, he wrote more than thirty plays and twenty-seven screenplays, including *The Odd Couple*, *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, and *Lost in Yonkers*.

But before Simon became one of America's best-known playwrights, he was a young comedy writer trying to make a name for himself in the rapidly growing world of television. In the early 1950s, Simon joined the writing staff of *Your Show of Shows*, a hugely popular live television comedy program starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. The writing staff included future comedy legends such as Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Larry Gelbart.

The experience became the inspiration for *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*.

Rather than writing a completely literal account of his time at *Your Show of Shows*, Simon created fictional characters based on people he knew. The character Lucas Brickman, for example, serves as Simon's stand-in, while Max Prince is inspired by Sid Caesar. Other writers are fictionalized versions of members of Caesar's writing staff. Simon was interested not only in the jokes these writers created, but in the people behind the jokes.

Simon continued writing plays, films, and television throughout his career. He received the Pulitzer Prize for *Lost in Yonkers* in 1991, the Kennedy Center Honor in 1995, and the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2006.

Who Is He?

Playwright • Screenwriter • Comedy Writer

Major Works

- ☕ *The Odd Couple*
- ☕ *Barefoot in the Park*
- ☕ *Lost in Yonkers*

MEET THE WRITER'S ROOM

MAX PRINCE

The star of The Max Prince Show. Max is enormously talented, unpredictable, demanding, and deeply insecure. He wants to make people laugh, but he also worries constantly about whether he's still funny.

Inspired By: Sid Caesar

LUCAS BRICKMAN

The newest writer on the staff and our window into the writers' room. Lucas is ambitious and excited to be there, but he is still learning how to survive among professional comedy writers.

Inspired by: Neil Simon

KENNY FRANKS

A confident and experienced comedy writer. Kenny understands the business and knows how to compete for Max's attention.

Inspired by: Larry Gelbart

VAL SLOTSKY

A Russian-born writer whose experiences as an immigrant influence both his personality and his comedy.

Inspired by: Mel Tolkin

IRA STONE

A wildly talented but eccentric writer. Ira is constantly worrying about his health and has a particularly unusual personality.

Inspired by: Mel Brooks

MILT FIELDS

A writer who is always trying to stand out in an extremely competitive room.

Inspired by: Sheldon Keller

BRIAN DOYLE

Another member of the writing team who contributes to the constant competition and chaos.

Inspired by: Tony Webster

CAROL WYMAN

The only woman on the writing staff. Carol is determined to be recognized as a comedy writer—not simply as a woman working in comedy.

Inspired by: Lucille Kallen and Selma Diamond

HELEN

Max's secretary, who has her own perspective on the chaos happening around her.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF TELEVISION: Television Was LIVE?!

Today, a television comedy might take months to write, film, edit, and release. In the 1950s, things worked very differently.

Your Show of Shows, the real television program that inspired Laughter on the 23rd Floor, aired from 1950–1954. It was a live comedy-variety program starring Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. That meant that when viewers watched the show, the performers were actually **performing it at that moment.**

There was no streaming.

No DVR.

No YouTube.

No easy way to edit a mistake out afterward.

If an actor forgot a line, the audience saw it.

If a prop broke, the audience saw it.

If a joke didn't get a laugh...

the writers knew immediately.

The writers' room was therefore under enormous pressure. They had to continually generate new material for each week's broadcast.

The Smithsonian notes that Your Show of Shows helped shape the vocabulary and style of television comedy and became an important launching point for comedians and writers including Neil Simon, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Larry Gelbart.



THINK ABOUT IT

How would your creative process change if your work had to be performed live every week?

What Makes Something Funny?

Imagine your teacher gives you the following assignment:

WRITE SOMETHING FUNNY

Where do you begin?

Comedy is often treated as if it is simply about having a good sense of humor. But professional comedy writing is much more complicated.

The writers in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* have to constantly generate jokes and sketches for a television audience. They are competing with each other, trying to impress Max, and attempting to figure out what an audience will find funny. One of the reasons the writers' room is so chaotic is that there isn't one universal definition of 'funny.'

Something that makes one person laugh might make another person uncomfortable. A joke that works in one time period might not work in another. A joke that works for one audience might completely fail with another.

Comedy can come from:

- **Surprise:** the audience expects one thing and gets another.
- **Exaggeration:** something is taken to an absurd extreme.
- **Incongruity:** two things that don't seem to belong together are combined.
- **Character:** the audience laughs because of who a person is or how they behave.
- **Physical comedy:** movement, accidents, reactions, and physical situations create humor.
- **Wordplay:** humor comes from language, double meanings, or unexpected phrasing.
- **Satire:** comedy is used to criticize people, institutions, or society.



Can You Joke About Anything?

In *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, the writers aren't only fighting over jokes. They're also dealing with what they're allowed to joke about.

The play takes place in 1953, during a period of intense political fear surrounding communism and the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

During the Cold War, people in the entertainment industry could lose their jobs simply because they were suspected of having communist connections or associations. Radio and television networks were pressured to remove people from their jobs, and blacklists were used to prevent some performers and writers from being employed.



This created a difficult question for artists: What happens when you are afraid to say what you really think?

Comedy can be especially powerful because comedians can use humor to criticize politicians, institutions, and social problems. But that also makes comedy potentially dangerous. A joke can challenge authority. A joke can expose hypocrisy. A joke can make people question something they previously accepted. And a joke can make someone in power very angry.

This is one reason censorship becomes such an important part of *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. The writers aren't simply trying to figure out what is funny. They're also trying to figure out: What can we get away with?

The Library of Congress describes this period as a 'climate of fear' in which entertainment industries were pressured to purge suspected communists and people associated with communist causes.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

These questions are designed to help students prepare for *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* by exploring its characters, themes, historical context, and ideas about comedy. Use them to spark curiosity, make predictions, and connect the world of the play to students' own experiences before seeing the production.



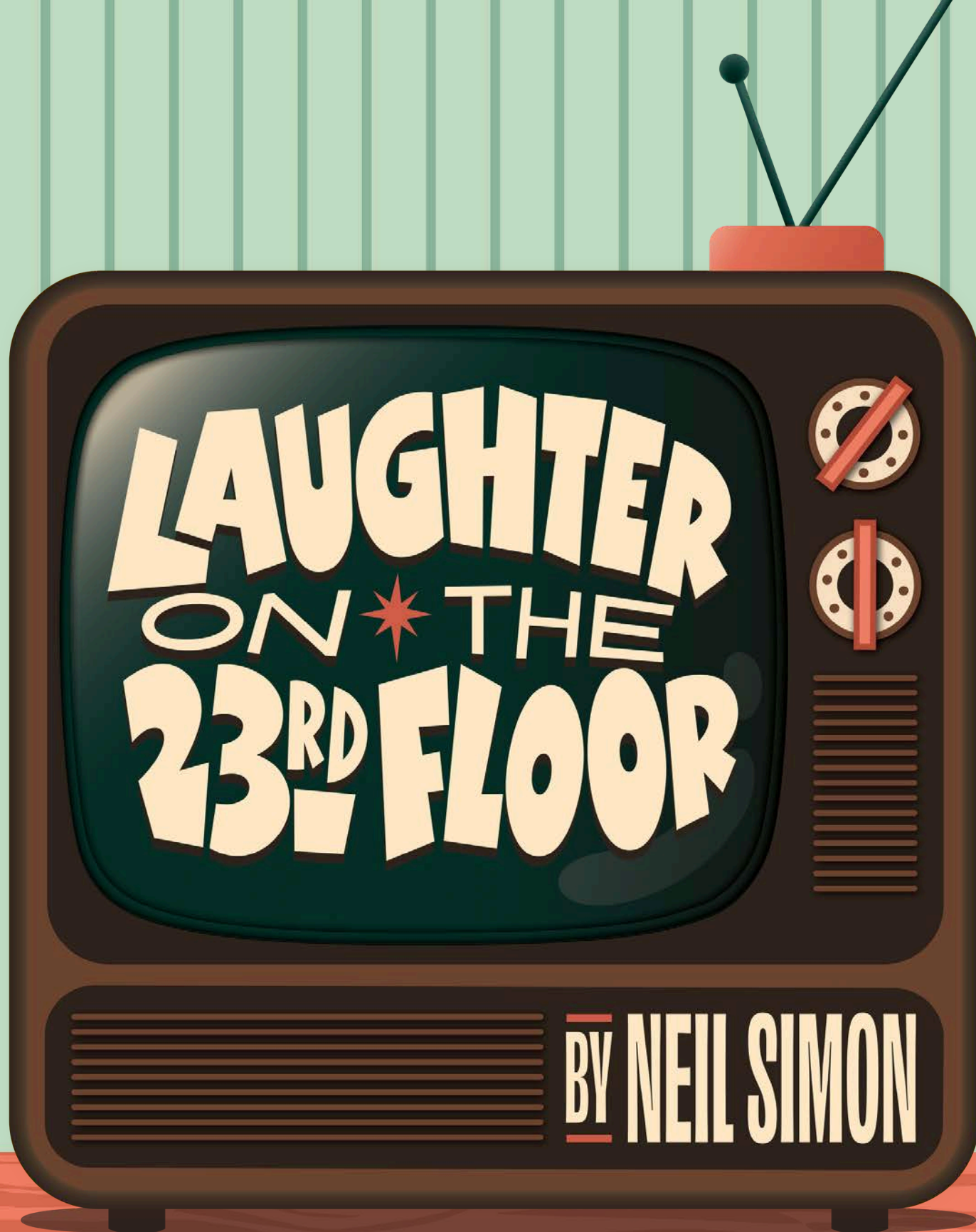
- What makes something funny to you?
- What is your favorite type of comedy?
- Do you think you would enjoy working in a room full of comedians? Why or why not?
- What would be difficult about having to write something funny every single week?
- What do you know about television in the 1950s?
- How do you think television from the 1950s would be different from television today?
- Should comedians be allowed to joke about anything?
- What does it mean to censor someone's art?

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS

These questions encourage students to reflect on *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* after seeing the production. Students can examine the characters, themes, comedic style, and historical context while considering how the actors, design, and staging brought the world of the play to life.



- Why do the writers constantly compete with one another?
- How does the pressure of television affect the characters?
- How does Carol's experience differ from the experiences of the male writers?
- How does the political climate of 1953 affect the characters?
- Why might comedy be especially powerful during a frightening or stressful time?
- What does the play suggest about the relationship between creativity and pressure?
- What does Max's behavior reveal about the pressure of being the person everyone expects to be funny?
- How does the play balance serious subjects with comedy?
- What do you think Neil Simon wanted audiences to understand about the people who make us laugh?



ENJOY THE SHOW!