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Arizona Theatre Company is a professional, not-for-profit theatre company. This means all of our artists, administrators and production staff are paid professionals, and the income we receive from ticket sales and contributions goes right back into our budget to create our work, rather than to any particular person as a profit.

Each season, ATC employs hundreds of actors, directors and designers from all over the country to create the work you see on stage. In addition, ATC currently employs about 100 staff members in our production shops and administrative offices in Tucson and Phoenix during our season. Among these people are carpenters, painters, marketing professionals, fundraisers, stage directors, computer specialists, sound and light board operators, tailors, costume designers, box office agents, stage crew — the list is endless — representing an amazing range of talents and skills.

We are also supported by a Board of Trustees, a group of business and community leaders who volunteer their time and expertise to assist the theatre in financial and legal matters, advise in marketing and fundraising, and help represent the theatre in our community.

Roughly 150,000 people attend our shows every year, and several thousands of those people support us with charitable contributions in addition to purchasing their tickets. Businesses large and small, private foundations and the city and state governments also support our work financially.

All of this is in support of our vision and mission:

Our vision is to touch lives through the power of theatre.

Our mission is to create professional theatre that continually strives to reach new levels of artistic excellence and that resonates locally, in the state of Arizona and throughout the nation. In order to fulfill our mission, the theatre produces a broad repertoire ranging from classics to new works, engages artists of the highest caliber, and is committed to assuring access to the broadest spectrum of citizens.
**The Sunshine Boys**, by Neil Simon

Directed by David Ira Goldstein

The vaudeville duo Lewis and Clark, who once ruled the vaudeville stage as the kings of comedy, kept audiences roaring for 43 years. Now estranged for the past eleven years, they agree to break their mutual silence for one last reunion, a skit on a television homage to the greatest stars of American vaudeville. Can they swallow their years of resentment for the sake of one last laugh? Reconciliation and friendship will contend with the power of old grudges in Neil Simon’s comic masterpiece about growing older in a world that seems to always be moving faster.

**Synopsis**

The play begins with the elderly Willie Clark bumbling around his home – an old hotel room on upper Broadway – blaming his self-inflicted inconveniences on everyone else. His nephew and agent, Ben Silverman, arrives, and after a humorous misunderstanding about how locks work, Ben enters to deliver groceries and Uncle Willie’s precious *Variety* magazine. Ben and Willie argue about Willie’s lack of work, before Ben reveals that he has a gig lined up: a variety special on CBS to pay homage to the biggest names in vaudeville, and the network begged for Lewis and Clark, the duo that Willie performed in for 43 years. Willie refuses, old grudges at his former partner, Al Lewis, holding strong. Ben wheedles, finally getting the disgruntled Willie to consent to one final television reunion, with a rehearsal in his hotel room the following Monday.

The day of the rehearsal, Ben arrives early to welcome Al Lewis to Willie’s hotel room. He leaves the two old men, who bicker intensely throughout their rehearsal. The scene switches to the set of a television studio, where Al and Willie are proving problematic to the production crew. They begin to rehearse their doctor sketch, but become sidetracked by their personal squabbles mid-scene. Willie collapses in a medical emergency, abruptly ending the taping.

Two weeks later, Willie is holed up in his hotel room with a brusque daytime nurse. Ben arrives, bringing tidings of many well-wishers, and convinces Willie to agree to a meeting with Al, who has been intensely worried since Willie’s heart attack. Ben reveals that Al is waiting downstairs; Willie quickly creates a dramatic scene, to properly appreciate the apology he expects to receive from Al. Al arrives, and the two continue their bickering over names, faces, and former acquaintances as though no time has passed.

**MEET THE CREATORS**

Neil Simon, American playwright and screenwriter, is generally considered to be one of the greatest writers that American comedy has ever seen. Simon was born in July, 1927 to Jewish parents in The Bronx, New York. His father, Irving Simon, earned his living as a garment salesman while his mother, Mamie, worked mostly as a homemaker. Simon grew up in the midst of the Great Depression, financial hardships and his parents’ marital strife providing an unstable living environment: his father would often leave the family for months at a time. In his youth Simon often sought out movie theatres as places of refuge, which sparked his inspiration to venture into writing comedy. After high school, Simon joined the Army Air Force Reserve and was sent to Colorado, where he was assigned to Lowry Air Force Base and attended the University of Denver in 1945. During his years in the Reserve he began his writing career as a sports editor; after his discharge he worked in the mailroom at the Warner Brothers offices in Manhattan before teaming up with his brother, Danny, as writers for radio and television scripts. Those first scripts led to bigger and better jobs, including writing for *The Phil Rivers Show* and Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows* in the 1950s.
In the late 1950s, Simon began writing his own plays, the first of which was titled *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961) and ran on Broadway for 678 performances. He followed his initial success with two more successful plays: *Barefoot in the Park* (1963) and *The Odd Couple* (1965). *The Odd Couple* won Simon his first Tony Award, and catapulted him to immediate prominence as one of the most popular Broadway writers of his time. Throughout his career he wrote more than 30 plays and over 20 screenplays, several of which were adapted for the screen from his own stage plays. His comedy came to encompass many styles of humor including romantic comedy, dramatic comedy, and farce, and in 1983 he became the only living playwright to have a Broadway theatre named after him.

Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers* was awarded the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and his critical reception began to shift: he was no longer regarded as simply a writer of comedy, but as a writer of great depth as well. The primary themes of his work center around “the silent majority” and their experiences, and focus on characters that are ordinary and imperfect, but good at heart. The key component of Simon's works is his brilliant humor, both verbal and situational, that weaves a story of depth together with comedic appeal and laughter.

Neil Simon has received more Tony Award nominations than any other writer in history, winning three of seventeen nominations: Best Author for *The Odd Couple* in 1965, Best Play for *Biloxi Blues* in 1985 and *Lost in Yonkers* in 1991, as well as a special Tony Award for contribution to theatre in 1975.

**Plays by Neil Simon:**

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**Selected Filmography of Neil Simon:**

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MEET THE CHARACTERS

WILLIE CLARK – One half of the famous vaudeville duo known as the Sunshine Boys, Willie is a cranky, fiercely independent man, not as young as he used to be, and nostalgically protective of the glory days of his glamorous past.

BEN SILVERMAN – Willie’s nephew and only living relative, an agent, frequently driven to heart palpitations by his frustration with his uncle, whom he looks after.

AL LEWIS – The former vaudeville partner of Willie, who abruptly decided to retire after 43 years of performing. Now elderly, he lives with his daughter and her young family.

TELEVISION DIRECTOR, at CBS.

PATIENT – A minor member of the doctor sketch, one of the Sunshine Boys’ most famous acts.

EDDIE – The young and efficient assistant TV director at CBS.

NURSE – A young attractive woman, playing a nurse in the Sunshine Boys’ doctor sketch.

REGISTERED NURSE – A sensible, brusque healthcare practitioner hired to look after Willie.

COMMENTS ON THE PLAY

“The success of *The Odd Couple*, produced in 1965, had convinced Simon that he could make people laugh. Having learned he has that capability, he no longer felt compelled to produce non-stop amusement, but worked to protect the serious moments within his plays. *The Sunshine Boys*, for instance, produced in 1973, is a very serious production that deals with old age and its problems. It is also a very funny play; through the attention-grab of its laughs, the playwright was able to get his message across.


“Billy Wilder, the director, once said to me (he was talking about a film but I think it applies to a play as well), “If you have four great scenes, you’ve got a hit.” He says if you don’t have those great scenes then you’re not going to make it. When I wrote *The Sunshine Boys*, the whole play came to me at once in a sense. Since I fashioned it somewhat (even though I didn’t know it then) after the careers of Smith and Dale, and got the premise that they had not spoken to each other in eleven years and then they were being offered this job to work together and didn’t want to speak to each other, I said, well, they’ve got to get together. That’s the first funny interesting conflict, then the rehearsal, then the actual doing of the show on the air. I knew that they could cause great conflict and problems with each other, and then there would be the denouement of finally getting together. I said there’s those four scenes. I don’t think about that all the time, but that time I knew where it was going – there was a play there – so I sat down with some sense of confidence.”

Six months after The Sunshine Boys had been laid aside and forgotten, I had dinner with Mike Nichols again, who was so successful by this time, he was using his Tony Awards as salt and pepper shakers. “What are you working on now?” he said, looking up from his homegrown escargot. “Nothing,” I replied. “I’ve gone flat. I started this dumb thing about two old vaudevillians who haven’t worked together in eleven years and have grown to hate each other, but then are asked to do their old act on The Ed Sullivan Show, and start to fight again when they begin rehearsing their old routines, but I don’t know, it all sounds so blah to me. It’s dull, right?”… Without missing a bite, he said, “I love it. Finish it.” … I was at the typewriter that night. The pages flew by effortlessly, and sailed into rehearsal and straight into a successful run at the Shubert Theater, not to mention an Academy Award for George Burns in the film version. Sometimes all you need is one line of encouragement.


For years before I wrote The Sunshine Boys, I had wanted to write a play about two partners in business. They owned something in the garment center, they were in the furniture business; it was a really good idea. They were two partners who were both making equal amounts of money but one was living like a king. He had a great house on the beach, he had a great car; and the other guy had nothing. So after about twenty years he said, “I think this guy is stealing from me.” I thought it was a great idea, but it evolved into these two vaudevillians who had nothing to do with money or one being richer than the other. Generally in a lot of my plays, two people are in major confrontation with each other, like in The Odd Couple or Barefoot in the Park or The Sunshine Boys. That’s how that play evolved, but you never sit down and think of an idea and start writing it. At least I don’t…


I loved writing The Sunshine Boys. It was a play that allowed me to be outrageously funny but also dramatic at the same time, because these two old codgers were very poignant to me. They were tragic figures in a way, but they were so funny also. They really didn’t know after a while whether what they were saying was funny or was from the act, because they talked in life in the same rhythms that they did in the act for forty-five or fifty years.


Produced in 1972, The Sunshine Boys can be regarded as Simon’s salute to vaudeville – his affectionate tribute to a bygone era of comedy. But the play is primarily centered on two themes: [1] old age – a subject that was new for Simon but one that he handled with sensitivity and skill; and [2] incompatibility – a theme that the playwright had previously explored in comedies such as Barefoot in the Park and The Odd Couple.

Susan Koprince, Understanding Neil Simon, University of South Carolina Press, 2002

Mr. Simon’s plays, even the romantically wistful ones like Barefoot in the Park and Brighton Beach Memoirs, have always moved to a vaudeville beat, to the unheard punctuation of rim shots and the pauses of holding for laughs. Wisecracks are the glue that keeps families and friends together in his universe, allowing them to express love and hate without killing one another. The Sunshine Boys strips the sensibility to its basics and reveals the raw hostility at its core. It also celebrates the clown’s classic gift for turning anger into art. Estranged for more than a decade when the play begins, after having worked together for 40-some years, [Al Lewis and Willie Clark] really, really don’t like each other. But each knows how darn good the other is professionally, and that they somehow complete each other on a stage.


— Reprinted with permission from The Guthrie Theater
A strange phenomenon, this two headed monster who finds himself totally involved in situations, and then suddenly and without warning steps back to watch the proceedings. There is evidence that this phenomenon is prevalent among that strange breed called writers, but it is even more prevalent among that stranger breed called comic writers. … I am a creature controlled by some cruel fate that has twisted and warped my personality so that at the first sign of personal involvement, I become transformed from human being into the most feared and dangerous beast on earth, the observant-writer.


I grew up in a family that split up dozens of times. My father would leave home, be gone for a few months and then come back, and I felt that our life was like a yo-yo! We’d be spinning along pretty good, and then – zapp, the string would break and he was gone.


I use the comedy in a way to get the audience’s attention and then sort of pull the rug from underneath them. That’s how I view life: things are wonderful, things are going along just great, and then a telephone call comes and just pulls the rug from under you. Some tragic thing, some tragic event, had happened in your life, and I say if it can happen in life I want to do that in the theatre. It took a long time to convince audiences and critics that one could write a play that way. I remember reading Lillian Hellman saying, “Never mix comedy and drama in the same play; the audiences won’t understand it.” They say to me, “What are you writing?” and I’ll mention something, and they say, “Is it a comedy?” I say, “No. It’s a play.” They say, “Is it a drama?” and I say, “It’s a play. It has everything in it.”


What I try to do is make dialogue come purely out of character, so that one character could never say the lines that belong to another character. If it’s funny, it’s because I’m telling a story about characters in whom I may find a rich vein of humor.


I think my greatest weakness is that I can’t write outside my own experience. I’m not like Paddy Chayefsky who could go off and do six months of research and then write something extremely believable. I’d like to write about Michelangelo, but I don’t know Michelangelo. I don’t know what his life was like. I wish I could extend myself, but I don’t think that’s going to happen. I might play around with it from time to time. Those are the ones that end up in the drawer.


To sit in a room alone for six or seven or ten hours, sharing the time with characters that you created, it’s sheer heaven. And if not heaven, it’s at least an escape from hell.

I’ve never tried to plot out my plays through to the end, since I’ve found it as much an exercise in futility as trying to predict what would happen in my own life a month hence. They both invariably unfold and reveal themselves when the appropriate time comes.


The problems we cause ourselves are not necessarily a laughing matter, but when I put it down on paper, and get it right, then put it up on stage and make that stage the mirror of our own responses and reactions, more often than not the audiences seem to laugh at themselves. They usually say, “I know someone exactly like that,” when in fact they may be talking about themselves.


I have to fight off those detractors who attack me for committing the heinous crime of being “popular.” To my credit, I will say, throwing humility to the winds, that being “popular” is a much greater attribute than being “unpopular.” Unless you’re very unpopular, which might get you into a select group called “cult favorites.” Being “too popular,” however, is an unpardonable sin, at least if you had any thoughts of trying to be accepted by that lofty circle of writers who decide who does and does not get into the Pantheon. I’m not sure where the Pantheon is. I think it used to be at 48th Street off Madison Avenue, but since Thai restaurants became the in thing, the Pantheon has relocated.


Writing, I think, is not always an act of creation. Sometimes I think it’s like a poison that inhabits your being, and the only way to get rid of it is to have the pen press deeply and quickly on the empty pages, releasing your darkest secrets and your most shameful thoughts. Those writers who go to the deepest are the ones who have lived there as well: O’Neill, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Beckett. The rest of us are not so brave, or perhaps not so damaged and broken so we do not soar. For us, to look at our own lives and to expose as much as you can allow yourself to, is to bring relief and understanding to what pains you. I wish I could go deeper, further, but again I think I do. I make the effort if not the entire journey, but the effort exhausts me as much as the farthest journey I could take.


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THE HISTORY OF VAUDEVILLE

Vaudeville first emerged as a specific art form in the 1880s, and quickly established itself as the most popular form of entertainment in America. Deriving its origins from the variety shows popular in frontier settlements and growing urban centers during the early and mid-1800s, the end of the Civil War brought with it unprecedented alterations in the social and economic fabric of the United States, which the expanding entertainment industry was quick to exploit.

Previous to the development of vaudeville, evenings of varied entertainment consisting of singers, dancers, comedians, jugglers, and other short “acts” were not uncommon, though the somewhat questionable nature of their content limited patronage to men, and were more likely to appeal to somewhat unrefined tastes. The term “vaudeville” first appeared in 1871 with the formation of Sargent’s Great Vaudeville Company of Louisville, Kentucky, which sought to appeal to the growing middle class through the word’s supposed French roots, and lending a connotation of quality and gentility.
In 1881, the economic opportunity provided by a growing middle class with the sudden luxury of leisure time led theatre manager Tony Pastor, a former circus ringmaster, to capitalize on the invention of a more “polite” variety show in several of his New York venues. Hoping to tap into the flow of New York shoppers, mostly females and families with extra cash and spare time that spent their afternoons uptown, Pastor ceased the sale of liquor in his theatres, removed questionable material from his stages, and offered gifts of hams or coal to his patrons. His profits began to reflect his successful business strategy, and other theatre managers quickly followed his lead.

Another theatrical businessman by the name of B.F. Keith furthered Tony Pastor’s economic experiment in Boston in the mid-1880s, censoring performances on his stages through blue envelopes containing orders to change or omit any questionable content. Any performers bold enough to act contrary to Keith’s policies of cleanliness and order were fired immediately, and prohibited from working in any of Keith’s venues—a vast empire of theatres across the U.S. and Canada. Through militant censorship, Keith and his managing partner E.F. Albee—adoptive grandfather to the future Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright Edward Albee—introduced vaudeville as “legitimate” theatre, pleasing to an entire audience of women and families previously unavailable to variety entertainment while still maintaining the variety structure appreciated by their previous audiences. Thus the “clean” vaudeville was established as the true entertainment of the middle class, bridging high and low entertainment for maximum success at the box office.

The “polite” entertainment of vaudeville also began to extend past the edge of the stage as theater managers began to employ teams of ushers to moderate audience behavior as well. In previous eras, audiences had voiced their pleasure or displeasure through immediate vocal and physical responses, sometimes throwing items at the performers or onto the stage to boldly convey their opinions—audiences, too, were now expected to adhere to rules of polite society and were informed of infractions by printed cards carried by ushers, upon threat of ejection from the theatre.

Keith and Albee were also the first to engineer a network of allied venues through which a show could travel on a circuit for a regional or national tour. Other theatre managers copied their model; by the late 1890s, vaudeville circuits reached nearly all sizeable population centers, maximizing profits with standardized bookings, a ready supply of highly skilled performers, and a wide following on a national scale.

From approximately 1880 to 1920, more than 25,000 performers made their living on the vaudeville stage, with more than 12,000 people employed at any given moment. Entertainers were generally on the road for up to 42 weeks at a time, following a circuit owned by one of the major producing companies and operating on one of three generalized scales. “Small time” performers worked at smaller venues for less money and more frequent performances, sometimes even continuous performances which could run non-stop for up to 12 hours. “Medium time” acts usually performed twice per day in moderately sized venues, while “big time” performers at large, urban theatres could make several thousand dollars per week. Big time houses offered a grand luxury experience to theatergoers, catering mostly to the middle and upper-middle classes. The most famous of these was Keith’s Palace Theatre in New York City, built in 1913 and known simply as “the Palace” by aspiring vaudevillians.

Vaudeville also introduced previously unexplored innovations in theatrical business, developing specialized theatres and circuits specifically tailored to audience demographics: Black vaudeville began to develop as its own sub-genre, as did vaudeville performances for speakers of Italian or Yiddish. Also, as vaudeville progressed into the 20th century, a semi-exotic and forbidden fascination with the female form began to emerge, and the sexual spectacle of the female body became more frequent in American entertainment and advertising, bringing in large audiences and higher profits.

The success of vaudeville continued well into the 1900s, beginning to incorporate short film segments as the medium emerged in the 1910s. However, the allure of the much more cost-effective silver screen would eventually facilitate the demise of vaudeville, tempting the stars of the stage with higher salaries and better working conditions in film. The innovation of broadcast radio and the introduction of sound into film in the 1930s further hastened the end of the era, leaving us today with nods to the art form found in the variety structure of such popular television shows as The Late Show with David Letterman and Saturday Night Live.
Below are descriptions of some of the most famous performers to ever grace the American vaudeville stage.

**TONY PASTOR** (1837-1908) — Tony Pastor, known as “the Father of Vaudeville,” began his career as a singer and child prodigy at P.T. Barnum’s American Museum, before embarking on a performance career in minstrel shows, circuses, and variety revues. A particular specialty of Pastor’s were his creative “songsters” — lyrics written to accompany the melodies of popular songs. Known for the crude and humorous nature of his songs, fitting with the variety style entertainment of the 1800s, Pastor was one of the first to introduce the family-friendly variety shows that came to be known as vaudeville — more appropriate for the rapidly growing middle class and a classier alternative to the bawdy shows of his contemporaries. In 1865, he opened Tony Pastor’s Opera House in New York City where he alternated operettas and vaudeville shows. He slowly moved up in the variety world, acquiring bigger and better theatres and larger, more diverse audiences — including women for the first time. He was the first to introduce an edgy type of sketch comedy that satirized major events and public figures, and his shows and venues gave rise to many of the great stage performers of the era.

**WEBER AND FIELDS** — Joe Weber and Lew Fields were a famous vaudeville team known for their slapstick comedy. First performing together in 1875 when both were only eight years old, the pair became known for their famous “Dutch act” in which the duo portrayed German immigrants thrust into humorous situations involving their misunderstanding and mangling of the English language. The “Dutch act,” along with stereotypes of dress and behavior, also portrayed the sympathetic aspects of immigrants attempting to fit into American society — something a large portion of the American population could relate to. Despite the humor of the duo’s fame, their scripts contained a spectrum of emotion, from “get rich quick” schemes to the difficulties of trying to survive in immigrant poverty. By the 1890s, Weber and Fields were one of the most popular acts in vaudeville and the pair opened their own music hall in 1896, where they produced and performed in burlesques of popular Broadway shows alongside some of the biggest stars of their day. They performed together for nearly three decades before parting professional ways after quarreling in 1904. They reunited and broke up several more times, but eventually retired from show business altogether in 1930.

**SMITH AND DALE** — Joe Smith and Charlie Dale were a famous vaudeville duo that performed together for more than 70 years. Both born in the Jewish ghettos of New York City, the pair met as teenagers in the late 1890s. Born Joe Sultzer and Charlie Marks, the two reportedly received a great deal on business cards reading “Smith and Dale” and named their act accordingly. In 1902, Smith and Dale joined the singing comedians Irving Kaufman and Harry Godwin to become The Avon Comedy Four, one of the top comedy teams on Broadway, performing together until 1919. After the foursome disbanded, Smith and Dale stuck together and continued playing Broadway and the vaudeville circuit, including frequent appearances at the Palace, the greatest of the vaudeville stages. Smith and Dale regularly told their jokes with a heavy Jewish dialect; Smith’s deep, pessimistic voice in contrast with Dale’s high tenor. During the 1920s, their signature sketch entitled “Doctor Kronkheit and his Only Living Patient” became one of the most famous sketches of the 20th century — “kronkheit” being the Yiddish word for “sickness.” Smith and Dale made some film and television appearances in the 1930s and 40s, but the pair continued to work mostly on the stage, on radio, in nightclubs and on television as frequent guests on the *Cavalcade of Stars* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Their partnership proved to be one of the longest in the history of the entertainment industry, finally ending with Dale’s death on November 16, 1971, at the age of 89. Smith continued to perform, mostly as a guest star in television sitcoms, until his death in 1981. The two are buried together with a common headstone that reads “Smith & Dale” above the declaration, “Booked solid.” It is suspected that playwright Neil Simon gathered inspiration for his vaudeville duo in *The Sunshine Boys* from the lifelong friendship of Smith and Dale and the hostile relationship of Gallagher and Shean, though some think that Weber and Fields were a more likely example of backstage quarrels.
GALLAGHER AND SHEAN – Edward Gallagher and Al Shean were a highly successful vaudeville and Broadway duo in the early part of the twentieth century. Both solo vaudeville performers in their own right, the two first teamed up in 1912, splitting two years later. They reunited again from 1920-1925, and through their partnership, found their fame. Noted for their personal differences and backstage hostilities, the pair became most widely recognized for their successful song “Mister Gallagher and Mister Shean” which was included in the lavish Broadway revue Ziegfeld Follies.

THE MARX BROTHERS – Chico, Harpo, and Groucho Marx (and occasionally their two younger brothers, Zeppo and Gummo) formed The Marx Brothers, an American family comedy act spanning the first half of the twentieth century. The Marx Brothers got their start as a musical act on the vaudeville stage as the nephews of Al Shean of the famous vaudeville duo, Gallagher and Shean. They slowly began to transition to comedy and finally to comedy with music, and by the 1920s they were one of the most popular acts in America known for their satires of high society and their free-form improvisational comedy. As motion pictures began to develop “talkies,” the Marx Brothers signed with Paramount Pictures, and five of their thirteen feature films have been nominated by the American Film Institute as among the top 100 comedy films of all time.

EVA TANGUAY – Initially famous on Broadway, Eva Tanguay was the self-proclaimed “girl who made vaudeville famous.” Not a particularly talented singer, dancer, or actress, her vivid personality and originality made her one of the most sensational stage personas on the vaudeville stage. Her lavish costumes, racy antics, massive publicity campaigns, suggestive routines, and off-stage dramatics made her one of vaudeville’s top earners until her massive fortune was lost in the stock market crash of 1929, and she retired soon afterward.

ED WYNN – Born Isaiah Edwin Leopold, Ed Wynn became best known for his clownish comedy character known as “Perfect Fool.” By age 25, Wynn was writing, directing, producing, and starring in his own hugely successful Broadway vehicles before he transitioned into television, film, and radio roles. His most notable film roles of his later career were with Disney: voicing the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland and playing Uncle Albert in Mary Poppins.

W.C. FIELDS – William Claude Dukenuckfield first entered the vaudeville world at the age of 15 as a tramp juggler, and toured internationally as a comedic juggling star. In 1906 he made his Broadway debut, and began incorporating spoken comedy into his previously pantomimed juggling acts. He later had success in the silent film business, and moved effortlessly into the Hollywood circuit as sound became incorporated in film, relocating permanently to Hollywood as the world moved into the 1930s.

JOSEPHINE BAKER – Josephine Baker began dancing on street corners in St. Louis, and began her professional career at the age of 15 when she was discovered by the St. Louis Chorus. She moved to New York in the early 1920s where she performed in chorus lines on Broadway, often as the comedic “last dancer” in the line who would appear to have forgotten the steps until the encore, when she would perform a more difficult rendition of the dance with expert skill. She would perform as “the highest-paid chorus girl on Broadway” until 1925 when she travelled to Paris, France, sparking an illustrious career on the French stage, away from the racism she encountered in the U.S. Her most famous acts became her almost nude exotic dancing and, later in her career, frequent appearances alongside her pet cheetah, Chiquita.
**LONG TACK SAM** – Long Tack Sam was a Chinese magician and acrobat who achieved great success on the American vaudeville circuit. Sam was part of a Chinese troupe touring Europe, but when the troupe disbanded in 1911 due to revolution back in China, Sam headed for the United States. His act was a non-verbal performance, which was common in vaudeville, so there was no real language barrier to surmount. He performed as an opening act for the Marx Brothers, and it is rumored that Harry Houdini himself “borrowed” a few of Sam’s illusions and trademarked them as his own.

**WILLIAMS AND WALKER** – Bert Williams and George Walker were an African American vaudeville duo with roots in the minstrel shows popularized in the mid-1800s. As American tastes transitioned to vaudeville, Williams and Walker developed a comedic act complete with many successful songs. The pair also helped produce *In Dahomey*, the first Broadway musical written and performed entirely by African Americans. Known as strong proponents of black theatre, Walker and Williams strove to elevate the professional image of black entertainers, and were active in forming a black actor’s union in 1906. George Walker died in 1911, and Bert Williams continued performing to eventually become one of vaudeville’s most successful solo artists, earning a contract with Columbia Records and starring roles in numerous Broadway revues.

**A VAUDEVILLE EXCERPT: WEBER AND FIELDS**

Below is a transcription of an excerpt from a famous vaudeville sketch, “The Hypnotist” by Weber and Fields, one of the most popular comedy duos of the vaudeville era. The two were particularly known for their cartoonish personas of recent German immigrants “Mike” and “Meyer” – a heavily padded Weber would play the short, chubby “Mike,” while Fields portrayed the contrasting tall, slim “Meyer” who continually tried to cheat Mike out of his money.

**LEW FIELDS**: Ha, ha. How are ya, Mike?

**JOE WEBER**: Hello, Meyer.

**FIELDS**: Say, Mike.

**WEBER**: What?

**FIELDS**: Did I tell ya what I was?

**WEBER**: What is it?

**FIELDS**: I’m, I’m, I’m a mesmerist.

**WEBER**: A what?

**FIELDS**: A mesmerist.

**WEBER**: What is that?

**FIELDS**: You know . . . a gizzard [wizard].

**WEBER**: A gizzard?

**FIELDS**: Yes. I can, I can, I can look at you, and you close your eyes, and make you do as you don’t want to do.

**WEBER**: Oh, you mean a tipmohist [hypnotist]?

**FIELDS**: A tipmohist [hypnotist], that’s the idea. Yes.

**WEBER**: Ah, I see.

**FIELDS**: Did you ever have that done?

**WEBER**: No, I never was.

**FIELDS**: I can do it.

**WEBER**: Let’s try on it.

**FIELDS**: Sure, sure. Look at me. Now, close your eyes. Now, open your mouth. Now close your eyes. Open your mouth. Close your eyes!

**WEBER**: Oh no, no. I had that already.

**FIELDS**: What?

**WEBER**: I know that game: shut your eyes and open your mouth.

**FIELDS**: No, no. That ain’t a game. Here, look at me. Now, close your eyes. Stand still . . . You feel something?
WEBER: You got a hose in your mouth?
FIELDS: No, gracious, no. Look for the light.
WEBER: Who does?
FIELDS: Does what?
WEBER: With his wife?
FIELDS: Gracious! Now here, stand here. Now look at me. Now close your eyes. Now Mike, you think the same as I’m thinking.
WEBER: If I do that, we are fired.
FIELDS: Gracious. Will you listen to me, please? How can I get power over you, you don’t stand and listen? Now, close your eyes. Now Mike, I got you.
WEBER: You can have me.
FIELDS: I don’t want you. Now when you open your eyes, you’ll imagine you’re traveling in the Twentieth Century train. The train is going very fast, so hold on to the strap. Open your eyes. Brrrrp! You’re off. You’re in Chicago! You’re in Cincinnati! You’re in Pittsburgh! You’re in Baltimore! You’re in Washington! You’re in Philadelphia! You’re in Paterson! You’re in New York! You’re in New York! You’re in New York! Mike, Mike! Come out of Paterson! Mike! Mike! Listen to me Mike! Mike, please listen to me! Five [inaudible] I can’t get him out of Paterson. Mike! Mike! He must have a girl in Paterson. All right, all right, all right.
MEYER: Ahhhh.
FIELDS: Ha, ha. I’m glad you come to. Well, what do you think of it?
MEYER: I fooled ya: I was in Brooklyn all the time!

Source: Courtesy of the Michigan State University Voice Library.

MEDIA TRANSITIONS: THE END OF AN ERA

It is generally agreed upon that the end of vaudeville was hastened by the introduction of motion pictures. In fact, as well as its variety format, vaudeville was also known for its variety in media; the first displays of motion pictures were presented to vaudeville audiences, with the first on-screen performance taking place at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in 1896. Vaudeville shows began to increasingly incorporate motion picture segments in most theatres, and by the late 1920s film was an expected portion of vaudeville entertainment.

While film offered a cheap alternative to live performance, there was still one thing that live entertainers could do that the new-fangled cinema could not: speak. That is, until Warner Bros. studios introduced the first “talkie,” The Jazz Singer, in 1927. With the cinema already increasing in popularity and financial viability throughout the first decades of the 20th century, the impact of the new developments in sound were phenomenal. Theatres could now present recordings of big time performers for a fraction of the price of a live entertainer of less talent. Stars of the vaudeville stage began to seek their fame and fortune opposite a camera instead of an audience, and by 1930 the capabilities for sound had been installed in virtually every major theatre in the United States. The greater availability of broadcast radio also contributed to the decline of vaudeville, providing a permanent means of home entertainment to the common American.

Better schedules and working conditions as well as higher paychecks lured the greatest talents to cross mediums, and live vaudeville stages found themselves lacking talent and lacking funds. Stars could, and did, tape their acts and distribute their films across the country, wearing out an act in a fraction of the time it would have taken vaudeville audiences to experience it. Perhaps the greatest blow to vaudeville was the transition of the Palace, the most luxurious and decadent of vaudeville stages, into an exclusively film venue in November of 1932. The standardized distribution of films solidified the end of vaudeville, making cinema cheap and easily available to every American with a spare nickel in their pocket.
The 1930s brought with it the Great Depression, which further distanced live theatre from its audiences by making even the cheap entertainment of the movies more difficult to afford. Vaudeville was no longer the career it had once been, but was instead a launching pad to bigger and better things – namely television. The TV, commercially available since the 1920s, began to come into its prominent place in American homes as CBS and NBC, the two major broadcasting networks in America, began experimenting with programming in the 1930s. Over the following decade, sales of televisions rapidly increased, and by 1947 a television was a standard furnishing in American living rooms, prompting the constant 7-days-a-week programming that we are familiar with today.

While the space for live vaudeville disappeared, its spirit lived on in the screwball comedy films of the 1930s, like those of the Marx Brothers and The Three Stooges, reminiscent of the bold physical comedy that had so captivated vaudeville audiences from its beginning. Television variety shows and sketch comedy populated the major networks, many of which were filled with former vaudeville stars – and the variety tradition continues through the decades from such shows as *The Ed Sullivan Show* to the more contemporary *Late Night with David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live.*

“When vaudeville died, television was the box they put it in.” — Bob Hope

ENTERTAINMENT REFERENCES

ACTORS’ HOME IN NEW BRUNSWICK

The Actors Fund opened a retirement home for members of the entertainment community on Staten Island, which was relocated to Englewood, New Jersey in 1928. Currently housing 50 residents, the Actors’ Home is generally available to retirees of the entertainment industry who have worked for a minimum of 20 years. It was renamed the Lillian Booth Actors Home in 2003. Joe Smith and Charlie Dale were both residents of the Actors Fund Home in their elderly years.

THE BELASCO AND THE MOROSCO

The Belasco Theatre is a Broadway theatre, originally named the Stuyvesant Theatre, opened in 1907 by David Belasco and renamed in 1910.

The Morosco is another Broadway venue opened by the Shuberts in 1917 and named for Oliver Morosco as a sign of gratitude for his assistance in destroying the Theatrical Syndicate which had previously monopolized theatrical bookings in the United States.

“Sol Bernstein was the manager from the Belasco, and it wasn’t the Belasco, it was the Morosco.” — Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*
**BILTMORE THEATER**

A Broadway venue known today as the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, the Biltmore was opened in 1925 by Irwin Chanin, and is currently owned and operated by the Manhattan Theatre Club.

**BLACKFACE**

A form of theatrical makeup commonly used in vaudeville and in earlier minstrel shows from approximately 1830-1965, in which Caucasian performers painted their faces with a dark tint and acted out negative, stereotyped caricatures of African-Americans.

“What’s the matter, I can’t do black? I did black in 1928.” – Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

**BOB HOPE (1903-2003)**

American comedian and actor whose career spanned 60 years. He became one of the most recognizable names in American entertainment, appearing on Broadway, on radio, and in film, television, and vaudeville.

**EDDIE CANTOR (1892-1964)**

American entertainer, known for his “illustrated songs,” dancing, comedy, acting, and songwriting. Known as the “Apostle of Pep” and “Banjo Eyes,” he was also highly involved in charity and humanitarian work, known particularly for his involvement in developing The March of Dimes.

**THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW**

Television variety show that ran on CBS from 1948-1971, hosted by Ed Sullivan, a New York entertainment columnist. Hugely popular, Ed Sullivan became a household name and appearances on his show ignited the careers of many influential entertainers.

*Willie:* Did you tell them six times on *The Ed Sullivan show*?

*Ben:* [My kids have] never heard of Ed Sullivan. They’re three years old. They don’t follow show business.

**ED WYNN (1886-1966)**

Popular American actor and comedian best known for his clownish title character in *The Perfect Fool*. He also created the voice for The Mad Hatter in Disney’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and appeared in 1961’s *Babes in Toyland*.

**FANNY BRICE (1891-1951)**

A popular comedian, singer, actress, and illustrated song model, best known for creating and starring in the radio comedy series *The Baby Snooks Show*. Her life and career provide the basis of the musical and film *Funny Girl*. 
FLIP WILSON (1933-1998)
American actor and comedian famous for his weekly variety series, *The Flip Wilson Show*, and honored by *Time Magazine* in 1972 as “TV’s first black superstar.”

*Ben:* They’re trying to get Flip Wilson to host the show.
*Willie:* Him I like…With the dress and the little giggle and the red wig…

LEWIS AND CLARK
The fictitious vaudeville duo Willie Clark and Al Lewis, of Neil Simon’s *The Sunshine Boys*. Reuniting for a performance in 1972, Lewis and Clark haven’t spoken in 11 years after a 43-year career. Their vaudeville career would have spanned 1918-1961.

LUCILLE BALL (1911-1989)
American comedienne, actress, model, and business executive, Lucille Ball was one of the most popular and influential stars of her day, particularly successful in television and known especially for her sitcom, *I Love Lucy*.

MARCUS WELBY
*Marcus Welby, M.D.* was an American medical drama that aired on television from 1969 to 1976, starring Robert Young and James Brolin.

“Maybe I can get a job on Marcus Welby.” – Willie, The Sunshine Boys

MIKE DOUGLAS
An American singer, entertainer, and talk show host of his own television series, *The Mike Douglas Show*.

“Haven’t we already seen Mike Douglas twice this week?” – Registered Nurse, The Sunshine Boys

MILTON BERLE (1908-2002)
American actor and comedian, who became known as the first major American television star as the host of *Texaco Star Theatre*.

NBC VS. CBS
The National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) was formed in 1926, and became the first major broadcast network in the U.S. The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), originally a radio broadcast company, broke into the television industry and gained huge success in the 1930s, increasing the quantity and quality of American television.

*Willie:* I heard. You got a call from N.B.C.
*Ben:* C.B.S.
*Willie:* Whatever.

NICHOLAS AND ALEXANDRA
A 1971 film that chronicles the life of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and his wife, Alexandra. It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, winning two, for Best Art Direction-Set Direction and Best Costume Design.

“What the hell are we making, 'Nicholas and Alexandra'?” – Voice of TV Director, The Sunshine Boys
ORPHEUM CIRCUIT

A chain of vaudeville theatres, later turned movie theatres, founded in 1886 and running until 1927 when it was merged with the Keith-Albee circuit, eventually becoming the RKO Corporation. Originally founded by Gustav Walter, the Orpheum was sold to Morris Meyerfield and managed by Martin Beck through the heyday of its vaudeville operation.

THE PALACE

Broadway venue in Manhattan that was legendary among vaudeville performers as the top of the big time from 1913 through the 1920s. Operated as part of the Keith-Albee circuit, the Palace Theatre – known simply as “the Palace” in vaudeville slang – represented the height of vaudeville success.

“Tom Jones is gonna get a hundred thousand dollars a week in Las Vegas. When Lewis and I were headlining at the Palace, the Palace didn’t cost a hundred thousand dollars.” – Willie, The Sunshine Boys

VARIETY

An American weekly entertainment magazine, founded in 1905; Daily Variety was added in 1933 to report specifically on the motion picture industry.

Ben: What are you looking for?
Willie: My Variety.
Ben: I just gave it to you. It’s under your arm.

VARIETY SHOW

A form of entertainment popularized during the Victorian era that consisted of multiple varying acts including magic acts, circus acts, singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, jugglers, and ventriloquists, among other talents. Its popularity continued through the vaudeville era and into television, with such contemporary examples as Saturday Night Live.

VAUDEVILLE

A type of “family friendly” variety show popularized in the U.S. and Canada in the 1880s, it continued as the most popular type of entertainment until the early 1930s when television took over. Vaudeville traces its roots to many types of entertainment including the concert saloon, minstrel shows, freak shows, and burlesque.

W.C. FIELDS (1880-1946)

American comedian, actor, writer, and juggler, W.C. Fields was particularly known for the comic persona he adopted as a sympathetic misanthrope and egotist with a strong contempt for women, children, and dogs.

WILL ROGERS (1879-1935)

American vaudevillian, cowboy, humorist, and actor, Will Rogers was one of the best-known celebrities of the early 20th century. He was particularly known for his signature rope act, his 1920s newspaper column, and his entertaining social commentary.

“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…” – TV Announcer, The Sunshine Boys
Cultural Context References

$10,000

Ten thousand USD in 1972 had the purchasing power of approximately $55,000 in 2013.

“You would just have to do it one night, one of the old sketches. They’ll pay ten thousand dollars for the team.” — Ben, *The Sunshine Boys*

1972 Chrysler Imperial

First introduced by Chrysler in 1926, the Chrysler Imperial was their top-of-the-line model, marketed as a luxury vehicle on par with such rivals as Cadillac and Lincoln.

“Yes, the Chrysler’s a wonderful car.” — Ben, *The Sunshine Boys*

Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933)

John Calvin Coolidge was the 30th President of the United States, in office from 1923-1929. He was especially known as a champion of the middle class, a small-government conservative, and a man of few words.

“. . .Calvin Coolidge, that’s your kind of humor.” — Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

Casey Stengel (1890-1975)

Charles Dillon “Casey” Stengel, known as “The Old Perfessor” was a professional baseball player and manager, playing in the Major Leagues from 1912-1925, his managerial career extending into the 1960s. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1966, and his number 37 jersey has been retired by both the New York Mets and the New York Yankees.

“Casey Stengel, that’s a funny name; Robert Taylor is not funny.” — Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

Junket

A milk-based dessert that is similar to a custard, made with sweetened milk and rennet, the digestive enzyme which curdles milk.

*Willie:* I’m hungry.

*Registered Nurse:* You want your junket?

*Willie:* Forget it. I’m not hungry.

The Mayor

John Lindsay (1921-2000) was the Mayor of New York City from 1966-1973. Originally a liberal Republican, he officially joined the Democratic Party in 1971. After leaving public office, he often appeared as a commentator and guest host on ABC’s *Good Morning America*.

“I also got about 200 get well telegrams from just about every star in show business. Lucille Ball, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, the Mayor. It’ll take you nine months just to answer them.” — Ben, *The Sunshine Boys*

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)

The wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt was the longest-serving First Lady in the history of the United States, from 1933-1945. Once controversial for her political stances on racial and gender equality, she remained politically active for most of her life, eventually becoming one of the first delegates of the United Nations. She served as first chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, and later chaired the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women under President John F. Kennedy.
“Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt…What do you mean, who is it? Didn’t you just say it’s your daughter?” – Al, *The Sunshine Boys*

**ROBERT TAYLOR (1911-1969)**

Robert Taylor was an extremely popular American film and television actor from the 1930s through the 1960s, known for his roles in *Magnificent Obsession* (1935), the ABC series *The Detectives Starring Robert Taylor*, and as the host of *Death Valley Days* beginning in 1966.

“Casey Stengel, that’s a funny name; Robert Taylor is not funny.” – Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

**GEOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

**GEORGE WASHINGTON BRIDGE**

A suspension bridge spanning the Hudson River, connecting Manhattan in New York City to Fort Lee, New Jersey.

“I hate New Jersey…I’m sorry they ever finished the George Washington Bridge.” – Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

**POUGHKEEPSIE**

A city in New York, located midway between Albany and New York City.

“…if you’re gonna poke me in the chest again like that, you’re gonna end up in Poughkeepsie.” – Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*

**RIVERSIDE DRIVE**

A scenic thoroughfare that runs north-south through the west side of Manhattan, roughly parallel to the Hudson River, Riverside Drive was designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, known for his design of the grounds of Cornell University and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair.

“New Jersey is what I see from the bench on Riverside Drive…” – Willie, *The Sunshine Boys*
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Neil Simon has said that he “use[s] the comedy in a way to get the audience’s attention and then sort of pull[s] the rug out from under them.” What do you think he means by that? Do you think he’s done that with *The Sunshine Boys*? How so?

While on the surface *The Sunshine Boys* appears to be a straightforward comedy, there are some more serious underlying themes. Would you classify this play as a dramatic comedy, or a comedic drama – or neither?

The characters in this play bicker and argue a lot. How does Neil Simon find the humor in arguing? How does he find the dramatic elements of fighting? Is he successful in portraying both the humorous and serious side of arguing? How so? How does an actor portray this onstage?

How does Lewis and Clark’s onstage vaudeville act mirror their real-life relationship?

Why do you think Lewis and Clark continued to work together for 43 years if they disliked each other so much? Do you think they dislike each other as much as they say they do? Are they friends or enemies?

Have you experienced a relationship in which there was a lot of arguing, or had to work with someone you didn’t like? How did you handle that?

Why do you think Willie reads *Variety* every day? What does this say about him?

What role do you think time and aging play in this story? How does the advanced age of the main characters affect their behavior? How do you think age affects behavior in general? Does society have different rules based on age?

Are words with ‘K’ sounds in them inherently funny? Why? Can we explain logically what is funny and what is not?

Why do you think vaudeville was so successful as an art form? What are examples of modern day entertainment that have been influenced by vaudeville? Do you think if a vaudeville theatre opened up today it would be successful?

ACTIVITIES

*Language Arts*

Write a letter to your future, 80-year-old self. What do you wish to have accomplished? Where do you see yourself at that age? What do you hope is different, and what the same, between your life now and that far in the future? Now write a letter as your future, 80-year-old self to the present you. What advice would you have for your younger self? Any regrets?

In pairs, have students script the “perfect argument.” What is the inciting incident? How does the action build? What is the resolution? How would outside elements affect the argument? Change the given circumstances surrounding the argument; does that change the tone of the argument? Have students perform their arguments for the class. Who wins? Who loses? Is there a winner in a “perfect” argument?

*Theatre Arts*

Neil Simon was once told, “If you have four great scenes, you’ve got a hit.” Lead a class discussion about whether or not this is a successful formula. Split students into small groups and ask them to make a play out of only four scenes. What is the story, and what part of basic story progression does each scene represent? Have students create a single tableau for each scene, including one spoken line, and perform for the class. Were there any four-scene hits?
Put on a vaudeville showcase in your classroom. A lot of vaudeville was based on special skills the performers used to entertain the audience. Start by having the students create their own inventory of what unique skills they have… singing, dancing, playing an instrument, baton twirling, whistling, animal training, accents, sound effects, martial arts, sports, multimedia, etc. This gives the performers a platform to develop fun skits. Have the students divide into small groups and create a two minute performance using their “inventory of skills.” Perform the skits for the class or have the students work together to film and edit their performances into a skit comedy show like *Saturday Night Live.*

Help your students explore the physical characteristics of aging. Discuss what elements affect the body and mind as you age. Have students walk around the room or a small area and focus on different specific physical elements affected by age. For example, walk as if your joints were sore, walk as if you couldn’t use your left hip, or your back hurt, or you couldn’t hear. Start to layer these together and play with using physical elements to play aged characters. Add in mental factors, and mannerisms. Develop yourself as a character as you age. Have students find a partner and give them small, ambiguous scenes to perform as their old characters. For contrast, have students then perform the scenes as their current, neutral selves. Ask students what they observed between the two performances, if their ages inform the circumstances or action of their ambiguous scenes.