



**QUESTIONING THE AUTHORITY OF PARENTS IN NEIL SIMON'S *COME BLOW YOUR HORN***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The most commercially successful playwright in the history of the American theatre, Marvin Neil Simon has travelled a long way from writing scripts for television and radio to the Broadway theatre and Hollywood. After Shakespeare, it is only Neil Simon's plays that ran four at a time in Broadway theatre and has won several awards including a Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Awards. Despite of delighting audience from the last five decades with his comedies, critics in favor of conventional plays could not appreciate his style of mixing comical dialogues with serious issues of life. His popularity demands an approach unique to itself. Simon plays mostly move around the domestic life of the contemporary middle class Americans holding high at the same time, the traditional values in the time of social, political and economical turmoil. For the present study his first monumental play, **Come Blow Your Horn** is taken up.*

Family seems to be more than a prediction a near obsession with Neil Simon. Even when he focuses on siblings or a couple, in comes an extended members of the family as parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, in-laws and even family friends to abound his plays. Simon has not written social or political plays, but has chosen a familiar aspect for his plays. He explores various themes in domestic life as siblings' rivalry, generation gap, communication gap, coming of age, bond with relatives and family bonds in his plays, which are against the back ground of Sexual Revolution, the Great Economic Depression, Racial Discrimination, Cold War with Russia and fear of the Great Wars. Simon in an interview with James Lipton says:

I have always thought the family was the microcosm of what goes on in the world. I write about the small wars that eventually become big wars.<sup>1</sup>

Simon wrote *Come Blow Your Horn* during the time of 'Sexual Revolution' in America when the youth in hunt of freedom both in action and thought, moved away from parents to live separately, to stand on their legs and hunt their dreams. Questioning the authority of the parents was the order of the day. The old traditional values were in decay



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causing alarm to the parents. There was a blow to the institution of family when the youth refused long to enter into a permanent bond, lest it will curtail their freedom, but loved to indulge in temporary fascinating relations and even in pre-marital sex which will prove dangerous to their married relations. All these are projected making Alan, a representative of modern American youth who moves without a sense of responsibility neglecting a proper job and marriage in *come Blow your Horn*.

*Come Blow Your Horn* is Neil Simon's first monumental venture to write plays for the Broad way Theatre.. The experience of his earlier comedy-writing for televisions is visible in his dialogues, characterization and situations as well. An autobiographical note can be traced and he recalls the period when Simon and his elder brother Danny have left their parents to live separately in an apartment. Alan Baker is based on Danny and Buddy is modeled after Simon. The play is in a way Simon's own declaration of independence, breaking away from his brother professionally.

The play is about two brothers who make efforts to break free from parents and at the end Alan Baker truly comes into his manhood. Initially, the brothers are portrayed as 'The Odd Couple'. At thirty three, Alan is sophisticated, worldly and experienced with women .In contrast to him, Buddy is portrayed as quiet, shy person who is unsure of himself. This contrast helps Simon to bring the theme of maturation in the youngsters.

The play opens with the return of Alan and his girlfriend Peggy Evans, from ski trip to Vermont, where she is supposed to be introduced to Hollywood producer, Mr. Manheim by Alan. It is so apparent that there is no man as Mr. Manheim, not even much skiing is done on their trip. Alan brings her to his apartment only to continue his sport. But Alan sends her out as his brother, a twenty year old, 'reserved, unsure, shy' comes to his apartment and declares himself that he has left his parents to breathe independently.

...But you know why I really left home. I don't want to have milk and cake standing over the sink any more. I want to sit in a chair and eat like real people.<sup>2</sup>

Their conversation brings out their perceptions of their parents and family business, a waxed fruit manufacturing, in which they are employed. A telephone call from their mother interrupts their conversation. She wants Buddy to return home immediately as their father is angry with Alan's action of not honoring the appointment with Mr. Meltzer, a valued customer of their business. Buddy is convinced by his mother, but he is stopped by Alan who encourages him to stay back in his apartment. Alan tells to Buddy, "When



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you're sixty five you get social security, not girls."(CBH.24). Alan is expecting the return of Peggy in ten minutes, but he is surprised to see his father when he opens the door. This is one of the unexpected entries which are used as 'running gags' by Simon as in a French Farce. The scenes are also like French scenes where one exits while the other enters and mostly the stage is occupied by only two characters. The generation gap is projected with humor while Alan becomes the representative of the modern American Youth who feel restless to settle in marriage. Buddy hides in the bed room leaving place for two characters. Alan is accused by his father for not turning up to his customer's order. Alan answers to his father:

Alan : ...what good does it do coming in? You don't need me. You never ask my advice about the business, do you?

Father : What does a skier know about wax fruit?

Alan : You see? You see? You won't even listen.

Father : Come in early. I'll listen.

Alan : I did. For three years. Only

then I was "too young" to have anything to say. And now that

I've got my own apartment, I'm too much of a "bum" to have anything to say. Admit it, Dad.

You don't give me the same respect you give the night watchman.  
(CBH.28-29)

Father remarks Alan sarcastically, "At least I know where he is at night."(CBH.29) Harry's stand on Alan is understandable, but not excusable. Harry considers his son a good for nothing, still unmarried though he is over thirty and wayward as compared to his brother Buddy. Alan replies to Harry, "Who made thirty the closing date? All I want to do is have a little fun out of life like any other healthy, normal American boy". (CBH.29)

Ironically, Harry leaves the apartment telling Alan that he will throw himself in front of an air plane the day his brother becomes like him. Scared Buddy comes out from the bed room and rushes to make a telephone call to his mother asking her to tear the letter he has left while leaving



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home as a sign of 'Declaration of Independence' before his father sees it. Alan asks Buddy to relax and first he telephones to Mr. Meltzer to lie him as he has missed the appointment with him due to his being in Atlantic city with girls, who are intended for him. He promises him to get the girls to him immediately. He calls to Chickie Parker, asking to meet him with her French roommate at Croyden Hotel within half an hour. For Buddy it is incredible, he remarks: "...it took me three months to get a date for my prom."(CBH.32)

Simon adopts certain techniques found in well made French Farces as exchange of identities in the two brothers. Some scenes are constructed like French scenes: when one character exits, another comes on stage and a new scene commences. In Act-I, Alan talks seductively with Peggy Evans, who leaves just before Buddy arrives. Basically, the play is written for two actors on the scene. The conflict between each pair of characters is focused.

Alan is shocked with the announcement of arrival of Conie Dayton herself by intercom. He explains his brother that Connie is the nicest and is different from other girls though he has no intention to marry her. In the following scene Alan confronts not only with Conie, but also with the choice he has to make between having only an affair with her or to get married to her. It is the resonance of a choice between his

present thought and his parent's wishes. Conie informs to Alan that she has given up her travelling job in industrial show as she wants to be near Alan in New York. She expresses her willingness to "... march down the aisle or into the bedroom?"(CBH.42). Alan tries to shock her asking her to march into the bed room. She is speechless as she doesn't have any chance. She firmly says to Alan while leaving, "I just figure if I'm going into business here I might as well get the rest of my merchandise". (CBH.44)

Very soon, Buddy returns to the apartment and Alan asks him to play the fictitious role of Mr. Manheim, when Peggy arrives to the apartment as he has to keep the appointment of Mr. Meltzer and the girls. Buddy is shocked when his mother is at the door step as he opens the door but not Peggy. Both Buddy and Mrs. Baker are agitated. Buddy is afraid as Peggy is going to come to the apartment, whereas Mr. Baker is worried about the reaction of her husband to Buddy as he has left the house. She says:

I know what he's going to say tonight. He'll blame it all on me. He'll say I was too easy with the both of you. He'll say, "Because of you my sister Gussie has two grandchildren and all I've got is a



bum and a letter”...  
I know him.  
(CBH.54)

In that desperation, Buddy goes out to get a taxi for his mother. In the meantime, she receives messages continuously on the phone. Though the plot is thin, the play relies much on the one-liners or visual gags for its humorous effect. When Mrs. Baker tries to take a series of telephone messages, she furiously searches for a pencil. This event is reminiscent of Vaudeville. ‘Surprise entrances’ and ‘door bells’ are devices used in the play as running gags. ‘Unexpected entry’ of his father, mother, brother- one by one at a time is typically found on television comedies. The bimbo, the ravish bachelor, and doting mother and stock characters are also found on television. Simon has drawn from his earlier experience of writing them:

Although reviewers criticized Simon for his stock characters, such figures are in fact a basic staple of comedy, and Simon knew from his experience in television that they were certain to draw laugh from an audience.<sup>3</sup>

She searches for a pen to note the calls, but could not find. Her fury during that time reflects a Vaudeville comedy. Buddy

brings many pens collected. She is confused so much with the calls that she messes the calls of Mr. Meltzer who doesn’t want Alan to call at Hotel Crayder because of the sudden arrival of his wife from Atlantic City and to Chickie Parker who wants confirmation of her coming to the hotel. Mrs. Baker leaves the apartment after delivering all the messages to Alan on the phone. This creates a complex situation to Alan later. Buddy rejects to play the role of Mr. Manheim for Peggy. The exchange of identities as in a French Farce is employed by the author. He does not hesitate to lie as Alan. In fact Buddy has excelled even his brother and enjoys pleasures of a ‘swinging bachelor life’.

The conversation between Peggy and Buddy is interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Baker, his father. Buddy manages Peggy by sending her away through the kitchen door, lying her that one who is called father is not his real father but a writer nick named ‘Dad’ as Ernest Hemingway is known as Poppa. He rushes to grab a book from the shelf, composes himself as if he has been reading all the evening and opens the door. Buddy tries to convince his father putting all his efforts to explain the reason why he wants to be independent and that he is trying his hand writing for the theatre or television rather than continuing to work in his father’s business. Buddy persuades his father to trust him for the night but, Peggy upsets everything with her sudden return to the apartment.

Mr. Baker stares at her as she greets



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him as 'Dad'. She again leaves them telling that she will go to the liquor shop to buy Buddy's supposed favorite drink. Mr. Baker calls Buddy also 'a bum'. Alan enters when his father is ready to leave the place. Alan crosses to the phone asking his Dad to wait. Harry walks slowly towards the door to hear the conversation of Alan with Mr. Meltzer, who threatens him with a law suit. Alan is on fire at the arrival of Mrs. Meltzer with a French girl, the result of Mrs. Baker's messed up messages which has lead to all the complications. After hearing the word law suit from Meltzer, Harry takes the phone from Alan, as he knows that Alan is responsible for arranging party and Buddy's activities also seems to be no better than Alan. Harry gets disappointed with Alan and Buddy, and leaves the apartment ironically showering blessings:

May you and your brother live and be well. God bless you, all the luck in the world, you should know nothing but happiness. If I ever speak to either one of you again, my tongue should fall out! (CBH.72)

Harry's departure is followed by Connie's arrival with her luggage and she starts for bedroom. She says that she loves him but, Alan tells her that they cannot marry as he has lost his employment. Connie

replies in anger, "I don't take prisoners. If that's the way you'll marry me, I don't want it". (CBH.76)

This is interrupted by a phone call from his mother who tells that their father has decided to move to Aunt Gussie's place. So Alan promises his mother to spend that night in his boyhood room. On the other hand, Connie refuses to believe that it is a call from his mother. His mother asks him on phone what he would like to have for dinner. The mistaken identities create a short misunderstanding which is not developed further. But as is a comedy, it is sorted out immediately. Its function is mainly to arouse laughter. It also projects on the bond between mother and children which is more flexible than the bond between the father and the children which is more rigid.

Third Act opens three weeks later during which an incredible transformation takes place. When Buddy's independence has led him to behave irresponsibility and with self-indulgence Alan grows anxious of his brother's behavior. Retrospection changes his life style and he grows more responsible towards himself first. He becomes more serious and feels insecure of his life just as his brother has been before.

Alan is dejected, while Buddy is cheerful with self-confidence. He is so confident in playing the role of Mr. Manheim without a bit of consciousness. When Peggy appears, he dismisses her saying that he has to look for some



locations. Buddy seems to have stepped into the shoes of Alan, Buddy asks his brother to wait until one

O'clock as he has a date with Miss. Snow, whom he has met in the village last

Saturday. Buddy says:

Buddy : You don't mind going to a movie, do you?

Alan : You're damned right I mind!

Buddy: What's wrong, Alan? That was our

arrangement, wasn't it? If one fellow had a

girl—

Alan : That was my arrangement. I did the arranging

and you went to the movies. Where do you get

this our stuff?

Buddy : I thought we were splitting everything fifty-

fifty?

Alan : We were, until you got all the fifties. (CBH.86)

Alan is so irritated with his brother's behavior that he threatens to slap him but

Buddy decides to move out of the apartment. Before this happens, Mrs. Baker enters with her suitcase unable to bear their father's behavior. The conversation is interrupted by the door bell. Mrs. Baker drags her suitcase into the bedroom hurriedly, as she mistakes that the visitor may be Buddy's date, but it is Mr. Baker, who arrives to take her home insisting on their bond of marriage: "She should be home. I'm still her husband." (CBH.93)

Just as Alan Baker represents independence, adventure and sexual potency, his father Harry Baker represents another. To him manhood means having a sense of responsibility towards one's family financially and emotionally as well. It is in a way holding up traditional values. But the problem lies in his attempt to rub them on his children. The two sons are typical lovers of freedom. Alan is irresponsible towards his life and work but behaves excessively in his personal life in the beginning. Harry at twenty one wants to be a writer, but his father discourages him. Alan understands this as his first move to free himself from the tyrannical control of their father. Harry says, "Plays can close. Television you turn off. Wax fruit lies in the bowl till you're a hundred. (CBH.67)

The play which is opened on



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Broadway in February, 1961 has run for two years and has launched his career as a dramatist. Though the plot is thin and characters stereotyped mostly, as Richard Watts Jr. writes:

With a certain amount of reluctance, I must concede that much of *Come Blow Your Horn* is entertaining... The play, while always a trifle ramshackle, does keep growing in effectiveness and the third act is quite delightful. Nor can Mr. Simon's ability to write a good, amusing line be dismissed from attention.<sup>4</sup>

Though all his characters are stereotypes, Harry Baker is an individualized father and his inflexibility exhibits him as head of the family and also offers comedy to the play. With this play, theatre and Simon discover each other.

Mr. Baker announces that he has tickets in his pocket for a trip of four months around the world and in that he plans to sell his waxed-fruit business. But, Mrs. Baker refuses to go. She says she is "not going around any worlds" (CBH.94) until all is

well with her sons and she is undeterred though her husband threatens her that he is going to take Aunt Gussie in her place. The door bell rings again, now Connie arrives, but not Buddy's date, which he is expecting. Connie arrives to see Alan from Cincinnati where she has been "Miss Automatic Toaster" before accepting the Electrical Dealers' offer to go to Europe. This is to confirm, declare and make an ultimate trail to settle in her life marrying Alan. She is a total contrast to Alan but Alan has a positive opinion about her and at the end of the play he feels that she is the right one to him. When he is about to propose her, the telephone rings. Mrs. Baker attends the call at the instance of Alan, as usual she is not able to name out the caller's name and Harry takes the phone from her, and is surprised that the person who calls is his customer Mr. Copeland of Begley's Department store in Texas, who has called to confirm a long order for waxed fruit. As the order is secured by Alan, Harry and Mrs. Baker feel happy and accept Connie's invitation to go out for a dinner all together. Buddy is expecting his date, but is surprised to see Aunt Gussie walking in when the door bell rings, but not his long-awaited date, Snow. She drops to just say 'hello!'.

*Come blow Your Horn*, the title of the play is derived from the well known nursery rhyme about *Little Boy Blue* in which the youth fell asleep while tending his livestock. The play calls for the boys' responsible sense. Alan Baker neglects his duties at the opening of the play. Alan



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answers such a call. He discovers what manhood is. The excessiveness of his brother creates awareness in him. Manhood involves more than independence and sexual prowess. Without his knowledge, he embraces the traditional values of his parents. In final stage of maturation, Alan integrates it with society. Buddy is still an irresponsible boy, an embodiment of Little Boy Blue to a large extent waiting for a date with some Snow. As Mc Govern comments:

... despite some character manipulation and more plotting for its own sake then he uses in later plays, at least one serious idea does come through, the significance of the family.<sup>5</sup>

[4] Richard Watt Jr., “A Comedy of Two Rebellious Brothers”, *New York Theatre Critic’s Reviews*, Vol.22, 1961, p.357.

[5] Edythe M Mc. Govern, *Neil Simon: A Critical Study*, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1978, p.15.

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- [2] Neil Simon, “Come Blow Your Horn”, *The Collected Plays of Neil Simon*, Vol- I, New York: Plume, 1971, pp.21-22. All the subsequent quotations are taken from this book.
- [3] Susan Koprince, *Understanding Neil Simon*, Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2002, p.21.