

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMEDY AND THE SPIRIT OF RESILIENCE IN NEIL SIMON'S *LOST IN YONKERS*

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## ABSTRACT

Comedy in the form of joking and farce is often an important means of engendering positive emotions, preserving a sense of mastery, hope and self-respect in individuals thereby enabling them to survive in seemingly hopeless circumstances. The present paper will focus on the coping potential of comedy in Neil Simon's play *Lost in Yonkers*. It will examine the effects of an authoritative dysfunctional Jewish family on the mental and social development of its children. Simon emphasizes the ennobling power of the instinctive comic spirit in traumatic situations. Grandma Kurnitz, the protagonist, wields authority and becomes an existential alien separated from the rest of the world due to the aftermath of hatred propagated by Hitler. Being a Jew, Grandma Kurnitz has suffered many hardships, trials and tribulations in her life. As a result, she blocks herself in a loveless solitude and hence develops a misguided defence mechanism. In *Lost in Yonkers*, comedy has been used as a 'cathartic mechanism'. With the cognitive play of jokes, black comedy, farce and caricature, Simon punctures the authority and develops a spirit of resilience among various characters that help them to survive and thrive.

**Key Words:** Comedy, Authority, Lost in Yonkers, Neil Simon, Catharsis, Jewish Family, Hardships, Coping potential, Resilience

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## INTRODUCTION

Neil Simon uses laughter as a form of coping mechanism. His aim is to purge the audience of the hardships of practical existence. His fans nicknamed him 'doc' because he relieves pain through laughter just as a doctor relieves pain through medicine. In his childhood, he got relief from his unhappiness by going to the movies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel. Simon once told an interviewer: "I was constantly being dragged out of movies for laughing too loud. So my first goal as a playwright was to make a whole audience fall into the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out"(qtd. in Satpathy 16). He employs low comedy; jokes and clownish physical activity to reduce the pain of his characters. Simon uses theatre as a relief mechanism, a place where audience can undergo 'comic catharsis' by shedding the burden and pain of existence. In his comedies, pain becomes the parameter of laughter. He believes that his own painful memories have added depth, creativity and variety to his plays. The greater the emotional arousal and tension engendered by stressful situations, the greater the pleasure and the louder the laughter when joking about them afterwards. Charlie Chaplin says: "To truly laugh, you must be able to take your pain and play with it" (qtd. in Sharma). For Simon, clowning and joking have a therapeutic purpose and in his plays he uses comic techniques as a 'defence mechanism'

Born in 1927, Marvin Neil Simon was the son of a Jewish fabric salesman who found it hard to express love for his wife and children. He experienced a somewhat shaky personal life, but found that this only adds to the texture of his work. Desperate for the affection that his father withheld, the self-conscious young Simon found a substitute of sorts by teaming up with his older brother Danny to write gags for stand up comics and, later on, sketches for the Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" and other early TV variety series. He says- "When an audience laughed, I felt fulfilled. It was a sign of approval, of being accepted" (Teachout 72). In *Lost in Yonkers*, Neil Simon attempts to puncture the authority through comic techniques. He also asserts the importance of the family in traumatic times like war. *Lost in Yonkers* portrays the liberating potential of comedy and its importance for the human race. In

this play, Simon asserts the redemptive qualities of instinct and human spirit against oppression and authority. It is a story about the importance of family love in survival against all difficult situations like war and oppressive anti-Semitic policies. Through jokes and caricature he portrays "the power of humour as a means of engendering positive emotions, triumphing over adversity and refusing to be defeated by the slings and arrows of life" (Rod). With *Lost in Yonkers* Simon reached the pinnacle of literary success. It won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1991.

The play describes the experiences of two teenage boys, Jay and Arty, who after the death of their mother, are forced to live with their stern, intimidating Grandma Kurnitz for ten months and to contend with their Aunt Bella (who is emotionally arrested), their Uncle Louie (who is a henchman for a mobster), and their Aunt Gert (who suffers from a speech impediment). A victim of anti-Semitism in Germany, Grandma believes: "you don't survive in this world without being like steel" (108). She allows herself to be emotionally hard. She abuses her children and becomes a monster in their eyes. She becomes a mini dictator, as Jay tells Arty: "When I was five, I drew a picture of her and called it Frankenstein Grandma" (89). Jay and Arty are forced to live in a dysfunctional family because they are homeless and they have no other place to go.

The play is set during World War II, a setting that plays an important part in the narrative. Simon published the play when America was entering the gulf war in the Middle East. As a result, the play's main themes, including survival, the power of family love and acceptance, also seem timely. These themes inevitably arise during any war or other military conflict when death and other tragedies are likely. Like every artist, his focus is not on history, but on how the history of anti-Semitism and the social context of war adversely affects Kurnitz family and makes it a dysfunctional family. He makes the play timeless by analyzing human behaviour in all conditions of trauma and fear. Literature whether tragedy or comedy cannot exist in vacuum. It is always rooted in society. Its emphasis on human behaviour makes it timeless, as human values replicate themselves in each age. Simon says in an interview:

"A good mechanic knows how to take a car apart, I love to take the human mind apart and see how it works. Behaviour is absolutely the most interesting thing I can write about". (qtd. in Lipton, James)

In this play, Simon deals with the issue of authority, but not at the level of society. He believes that family is the microcosm of society. He told to *The Paris Review* in 1992:

"I don't write social and political plays, because I've 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" (qtd. in Lahr, John)

He prefers to live within the sphere of human relationships, as authority at the level of society may be rooted or timeless, but authority at the level of human relationships will always be timeless. Authority of a dictator is documented by historian, but only an artist can portray human relationships affected by his dictatorship. Only an artist can portray the undocumented lives of helpless common families traumatized by policies like anti-Semitism.

Throughout her life Grandma Kurnitz has fought for the survival of her children, but the irony is that she herself becomes responsible for their abnormalities. In an attempt to teach her children how to be strong, she becomes a dictator and the incongruity of the situation is that they become rather weak and dysfunctional. Authority and discipline seems to be her overriding characteristics. She becomes cold and cruel. For young Arthur, she is 'hot house' as well as 'wrinkled ice cube'. Metzger notes that her character is ambiguous, as she is tyrant and protector, manipulator and mini dictator. She lost her husband and two kids early in her life. She wants to keep everything in her control through her courage because she has lost much in life. She has been a fighter throughout her life. She says:

"I buried a husband und two children und I didn't cry. I didn't haff time. Bella vas born vit scarlet fever und she didn't talk until she was five years old und I didn't cry...Gertrude, can't talk without choking und I didn't cry... Und may be one day, they'll find Louie dead in da

street und I von't cry...Dot's how I vas raised. To be strong. Ven dey beat us vit sticks in Germany ven ve vere children, I didn't cry... You don't survive in dis vorld vithout being like steel" (108)

In an attempt to control the lives of her children, she builds a hard cover around her family. She stops feeling and becomes cruel and calculating. She abuses her children physically and psychologically and makes them sick, vulnerable and abnormal.

Grandma's only child who can compete with her toughness is Louie. He is a henchman for a mobster. He is fearless, but at the same time most vulnerable to death. Louis Kerschen notes that his involvement with organized crime suggests that he does not really value his life, and it is only fun when there is a chance in getting caught by his enemies. He proudly says: "Nothing sweeter than danger" (119). He does not like Grandma but respects her. Like his mother, he teaches 'moxie' to the boys. He compares his mother to the Nazi general, Irving Rommel, and says to Arty when he refuses to eat the bitter soup given by Grandma: "but if Momma wanted him to eat the soup, he would eat the soup" (127). His hard world provides him only two emotions, excitement and danger. For Louie and Grandma, the appearance of being tough is more important than life itself. Louie praises the courage of his mother:

"You're terrific, Ma. One hundred percent steel, finest grade made. Eddie's out there lookin' for scrap iron and the chump doesn't know he's got a whole battleship right here... Nah. You can't get me down, Ma. I'm too tough. You taught me good. And whatever I've accomplished in this life, just remember- you're my partner" (137).

Both have faced deadly situations and are still alive but they have lost the true value of living. In front of Jay and Arty, Louie talks about the hardships faced by Grandma:

"She was no harder on us than she was on herself. When she was twelve years old, her old man takes her to a political rally in Berlin. The cops broke it up. With sticks on horseback. Someone

throws a rock, a cop bashes in her old man's head, a horse goes down and crushes Ma's foot. Nobody ever fixed it. It hurts everyday of her life but I never once seen her take even an aspirin...She could had an operation but she used the money she saved to get to this country with her husband and six kids. That's moxie, kid" (128)

Through Grandma's cold behaviour, Simon shows the psychological effects of anti-Semitism on its victims. She manages to escape the Holocaust but its horror remains in her life. Her own past misery is so much a part of her life that she cannot find any happiness in the family that remains. She has emerged as both a victim of the Nazi terror and a victimizer in his own family. In her essay "Beyond Laughter and Forgetting: Echoes of the Holocaust in *Lost in Yonkers*", Bette Mandl notes that in casting Grandma in the mould of cold unapproachable German matron and less as a Jewish mother, Simon raises some interesting questions about this woman's life. Did the Nazi succeed in destroying Grandma's Jewish culture, her love of family and children, and prevail in transforming her into their own ideal? Mandl says: "With erect bearing, harsh authoritarian manner, heavy German accent, she is pictured more German than Jewish" (qtd. in Metzger, Sheri). Simon shows the reflection of Hitler in her, as she makes her grandsons feel unsafe in America even as it is Hitler who put Jewish children at risk in Europe. Arty says to her:

"You just want me to be miserable because somebody made you miserable in Germany. Even Pop said it...Well, that's not my fault, Take it out on Hitler, not on me". (126)

Grandma brings the German oppression with her. Her authority is first questioned by Bella who thinks that they are safe in America. She accuses Grandma of spoiling the lives of her children:

"Thieves and sick little girls, that's what you have, Momma...Only God didn't make them that way. You did. We're alive, Momma, but that's all we are...Aaron and Rose are the lucky ones" (151)

Bella wants more than simple existence. She craves a life where she can receive as

much love as she is willing to give. Her speech before all family members oscillates between laughter and sympathetic tears:

"You Think I can't have healthy babies, Momma? Well I can...I'm as strong as an ox. I've worked in that store and taken care of you by myself since I'm twelve years old, that's how strong I'm...Like steel, Momma. Isn't that how we're supposed to be...? But my babies won't die because I'll love them and take care of them. And they won't get sick like me or Gert or be weak like Eddie and Louie...My babies will be happier than we were because I'll teach them to be happy...Not to grow up and run away or never visit when they're older and not to be able to breathe because they're so frightened...Let me have babies." (145)

Louis Kerschen asserts that Bella's childlike sensibilities allow her to see through her mother's iron curtain to a world where life is a joyful experience. She is hungry for experience. She says: "May be I'm still a child but now there's just enough woman in me to make me miserable" (152). She talks about the irony of being a child and a woman at the same time:

"Grandma- Stay the way you are, Bella, because you don't know vot such feelings would do to you.

Bella- Yes, I do, Momma. I know what other things you're talking about...Because they have happened to me, Momma...They've happened because I wanted them to happen. When I was in school, I let boys touch me...And boys that I met in the Park...And in the movies...Even boys that I met here in the store...Nights when you were asleep, I went down and let them in...And not just boys, Momma...men too. I needed somebody to touch me, Momma. Somebody to hold me. To tell me I was pretty...You never told me that" (150)

David Richards states: "Bella gives a wrenching plea for the right to love someone who will love you back in a world where steelier emotions normally prevail" (qtd. in Kerschen, Louis). Her behaviour asserts the

redemptive qualities of instinct and human empathy as opposed to the hatred of reason represented by Grandma. Bella prefers the warmth of relationships over mechanical responsibilities. "She is as warm and congenial as she is emotionally arrested" (92). She says to Grandma:

"Bella- But I'm smart, Momma. May be only as smart as a child, but some children are smarter than grown-ups. Some grown-ups I've seen are very stupid. And very mean.

Grandma-You don't have responsibilities, Bella. And responsibilities are not make meanness.

Bella- I don't want to be your responsibility. Then maybe you won't be so mean to me" (150)

Bella asserts her private space and her right to act like an individual. Throughout the play, Bella struggles to become an adult and think for herself. Her struggle against the incongruity of existence is portrayed in the following lines:

"Grandma- You want to know what you are, Bella... You're a child. Dot's two doctors told me. Not crazy. Not stupid... A child... And dot's how I treat you. And in this world, here there is so much hate and sickness and death, here nobody can live in peace, then maybe you're better off... Stay a child, Bella, and be glad dot's two Gott made you.

Bella- Then why did he make me look like a woman... And want all the things a woman should have? Is that what I should thank him for? Why did he do that, Momma, when I can do everything but think like a woman... I know I get confused sometimes and frightened. But if I'm a child, why can't I be happy like a child? Why can't I be satisfied with dolls instead of babies?" (150)

Her attitude towards life is different from her mother. For her, life itself is more important than mere survival. Her mother still remains in her past and survival is more important for her, as she believes when someone is dead everything is over.

Without survival there can be no question of warmth of relationships, because only those people who are alive can think of relationships. The relationship between Grandma and her children symbolizes the transition in values from the older to the younger generation. Alan Dale in his article on *Lost in Yonkers* suggests that the older generation's values and their tyrannical enforcement of them are based on adaptations for tribal survival that do not apply in new world anymore. Grandma Kurnitz keeps alive all the memories of anti-Semitic oppression in her mind, and her present attitude towards life is negotiated by her horrible past. Her nostalgia with the past is clear in the lines of Louie: "Grandma hates running this store. She hates living in Yonkers. You know how many friends she's made here in thirty years?"(127). Her children, being a part of next generation, want to cut off from their horrible past. They go beyond survival to enjoy life. Unlike their mother, children become very much a part of American life. Ryan Poquette notes that Grandma has faced her share of tragedies and has developed misguided defence mechanism as a result.

Simon wrote *Lost in Yonkers* forty years after the Holocaust. In the years immediately after World War II, Jewish Holocaust survivors were urged to forget what had occurred to create new lives and not dwell on the past. By highlighting Grandma's nostalgia with her thick German accent, erect bearing and harsh authoritarian manner, Simon portrays the effect of anti-Semitism across generations. Bette Mandl argues that *Lost in Yonkers* resembles Arthur Miller's play *Broken Glass*. She writes: "Elements that recall the Nazis far away are superimposed on a Jewish figure at home, resulting in psychological havoc" (qtd. in Koprince *Understanding*)

Fear rules the Kurnitz household in Yonkers. Kurnitz house is located just above 'Kurnitz Kandy Store' but there is nothing sweet about it. Everyone in the play is afraid of something. Jay and Arty are afraid of Grandma. They make ridiculous jokes about her to get rid of fear. Jay tells Arty: "Pop said she could swing her cane so fast, she could have been one of the greatest golfers in the world" (90). Jay tells Arty that all the members of Kurnitz family are abnormal and Aunt Bella is 'closed for repairs' (90).

He gives his own comic reason for her abnormal condition:

"I didn't say she wasn't nice. But she's got marbles rolling around up there... Mom said she got that way because when she was a kid, Grandma kept hitting her in the head every time she did something stupid which only made her stupider" (90)

They reduce her to a comic figure to bring her down from the position of a dictator. They mock her by calling 'wrinkled ice cube' and 'Frankenstein Grandma'. Through jokes they gain a sense of freedom and supremacy over a situation on which they have no control. They can temporarily break all rules established by Grandma. Kerschen notes: "They fight against their grandmother's definition of what it means to be strong. Following their own sense of strength, their efforts at self preservation actually exercise more strength than any other family member has". Jay conveys the message of survival near the end of the play: "We made it, Arty. Ten months here and we're still alive. We got through Grandma, and we're all right" (153). When Jay plans to make some money in order to reduce the financial problems of their father, Arty advises him: "What if one night we cut off Grandma's braids and sold it to the army for barbed wire"(111). Unfortunately, Grandma is listening all their jokes from her room. She rebukes them: "And you try cutting my braids off, you'll get your fingers chopped off" (112). In scene three, Grandma goes out for some work. In her absence, Arty breathes a sigh of relief and starts' jumping on her chair, Jay warns him:

"Jay- Will you shut up! She could walk back in any minute. You know what she'd do if she found you jumping on her chair?

Arty- (With German accent) Ya! She would chop off my legs...And Aunt Bella would cook dem for dinner. (He jumps on the bed)" (113)

In Act one, when Louie teaches 'moxie' to them by giving courageous examples from Grandma's past life, they puncture them with jokes about her courage: "Grandma is crazy Arty. Where did that horse fall, on her head?"(131)

The other members of the family are also caught in the atmosphere of fear. Gertrude gets nervous in the atmosphere of fear. Her breathing problem becomes intense when Grandma is near her. Kerschen notes that the very air she needs to live is sucked away from her in her mother's self-imposed void. Outside she is much better: "I don't have it that much. It's mostly when I come here" (147). Eddie is afraid of the loan sharks. Throughout the play, Simon bullies and teases the audience with his heart ailment. He writes in his letter to his sons:

"Although business is good, I've had one minor setback. I've developed what the doctor calls an irregular heartbeat. He says it's not serious, but doesn't think I should be travelling so much. But I can't afford to stop now" (110)

Louie appears to be fearless from outside but he too hides from mobsters lurking in the background. Jay notices the black Studebaker and the two guys who came looking for Louie. They look like killers to him. Ironically, Grandma herself is not immune to the atmosphere of fear that pervades her house. When she denies Eddie's request to keep Jay and Arty in her house, Bella calmly reminds her:

"No, Momma. They're not going. They're staying. Because if you make them go, I'll go too... I know I've said that a thousand times but this time I mean it ... I could go to the home. The home would take me... You're always telling me that... And if I go, you'll be alone... And you're afraid to be alone, Momma... Nobody else knows that but me" (110)

The boy's struggle to maintain a normal life in abnormal circumstances combined with Bella's insistence on achieving the happiness she has always wanted, forces the entire family to face each other, their fears and their own individual views on what it means to be truly alive. Through the struggle threatens to break them apart, it ultimately bring some ability to cope, if not heal and redefines the relationships of the Kurnitz family (qtd. in Kerschen)

Thus we can conclude that in *Lost in Yonkers*, Simon violates the overwhelming family authority. The young heroes save themselves from



terror with comedy. They laugh amid miserable situations. When they stop trying to be funny and tell the audience what they feel, the audience sympathizes with them. His sugar coated dialogues present the trauma of the characters in a digestible way. With the combination of tears and laughter they are easy to swallow and have desired effect on the audience. Alan Dale suggests that *Lost in Yonkers* has far more temperament and fibre because Simon has respected his own anger. Comedy is representative of caring and inclusive human spirit that cannot be extinguished by authoritarian policies like anti-Semitism (Scott 120). By revealing how incidents in his own life provide touchstone for his plays, he makes it clear that his plays also result from the runaway fantasies of a young middle-class Jewish American boy who wished to escape from the scarifying anguish of being born into a dysfunctional family.

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