



Anyone for Divorce?

IN HIS NEWEST COMEDY, playwright Neil Simon has managed to create a quite funny evening out of a pretty painful situation. Titled *The Odd Couple*, his play deals with the very real truth that our behavior is governed by an illogical need to exercise acquired self-centered compulsions, and that marriage is an infernal machine that permits two people to maintain their self-centeredness by being willing to put up with a degree of irritation from each other that would be unthinkable in any reasonable partnership.

To prove this, Mr. Simon shows us two friends, recently divorced from their wives, as they attempt to share an apartment. The lease-holder, Oscar Madison, is a morose, averagely sloppy male who leads a fairly disorderly existence and is usually about three weeks behind in his alimony (though his wife always alleges it is a month). His apartment-mate, Felix Ungar, is a man with a passion for such things as cooking, tidying up, and living a safe, hygienic, and economical life. Saran-wrap, coasters, and neat little notes left on the pillow are the torture-tools with which he has made life unbearable for his wife. And if any woman in the audience imagines she would prefer a neater husband, the demonstration of Felix's extension of this technique to his new symbiosis should make her fervently appreciate any such bonuses in her present marriage as unhung-up suits, unreplaced toothpaste caps, and unexplained latenesses in coming home for supper.

While Mr. Simon's Felix Ungar appears essentially to be a pathetic, tragedy-tinged portrait, the form of his play is a comedy. Just as in *Barefoot in the Park* he made his laughter out of the way average people dealt with the major complex of minor annoyances that faced two people trying to live together in the impossible city of New York, so in *The Odd Couple* he makes comic cadenzas out of our bleats of agony at finding ourselves surrounded by a barbed-wire fence of trivial nuisances.

The fun begins at the Friday night poker game, which Oscar no longer enjoys because it has lost its main value: the excuse to get away from his wife for a few hours. Indeed, as looked at from the outside, all the players are blissfully unhappy but the pain of what they do to each other and to themselves is exploded into fierce humor.

To increase the laughter, Mr. Simon brings in Felix, who, in the throes of the

breakup of his long-standing happy marriage, is planning suicide. Desperately Oscar persuades Felix to cancel these plans and share his apartment. In Act II we are therefore further amused to see Oscar and his poker-playing pals now suffering all the discomforts formerly reserved for Felix's wife. Somehow a poker game isn't quite the same when the cigar smoke has been removed by Puritron, when the cards have been washed with disinfectant, and the food and drink is not only delicious but impeccably served.

But funnier still is Oscar's ensuing attempt to snap Felix and himself out of their air-conditioned nightmare by setting up a dinner date with a couple of British secretaries who live in their building. Instead of a merry evening of romance and light lechery, it absurdly and hilariously deteriorates into a sentimental orgy of tears and motherly consolation for Felix in his self-indulgent sorrow over his wrecked marriage.

The last act arbitrarily resolves the basically unresolvable dilemma as Oscar tough-mindedly expels his guest and momentarily arouses the first spark of anger Felix has shown since the day Oscar dropped his cigar into Felix's pancake batter. However, he doesn't change but simply moves on to his next victim. While this act is less entertaining than the preceding ones, it nevertheless succeeds in completing comically a situation that is as grim as last night's unemptied ashtrays.

As Oscar, Walter Matthau is superbly stubborn, and all the quips that might in another actor seem contrived appear to come naturally out of an inner sour desperation. He knows he is damned but he nevertheless energetically goes through the motions of salvation. Similarly, Art Carney plays the unhappy Felix, "the only man in the world with clenched hair," as a being forlornly trapped inside his own personality. He knows that the fault is not in his stars, but in his having been "toilet-trained at five months." Director Mike Nichols again proves himself the master of *New Yorker*-style comedy achieved by casual reaction to major disaster and intense response to minor trouble. Furthermore, he exercises his characteristic thoroughness of invention by working out the means whereby successive cans of beer can be opened in such a way as to spray six feet up smack into an actor's eye, or later on to arrange for a cigarette lighter to clutch a cigarette just as the smoker is ready to lean back and take her first

puff. Oliver Smith has caught the dinginess of a lived-in New York apartment, and Jean Rosenthal produces a nice variety of mood with her lighting of it.

There are, of course, many dangers in presenting a comedy with such sobering realities lying so close to the surface. Here one laughs with more restraint than one does, for instance, at the exaggerated antics of *Luv*, or at the less deeply troubled characters of *Barefoot in the Park*. For in *The Odd Couple* playwright Simon has partially answered those critics who complain that his plays are entertaining but insubstantial by giving them a truer but still reasonably laugh-strewn evening.

A patently artificial and ultimately exasperating whydunit farce called *Catch Me If You Can* has been rewritten from Robert Thomas's French original (*Piege pour un homme seul*) by Jack Weinstock and Willie Gilbert. There are some good jokes in a barrel of mediocre ones, and there is a certain amount of suspense plus a series of surprises at the end. However, these surprises ring false because the actors have been too intent upon entertaining us (as occasionally they do) and have played their shams without giving us a hint that their behavior is motivated by a very different cause than the one about which we are told. The lineup includes Dan Dailey as a constantly harassed advertising executive, Tom Bosley as a friendly detective who always appears to be arriving too late, George Mathews as the impersonator of a "Grossinger's Diocese" priest, and Eli Mintz disguised as Eli Mintz.

HAROLD WILLIS'S first play, *A Sound of Silence*, pokes around in a vital area. That area is not so much racial injustice against the Negro in today's South as it is the forces that corrupt the well-intentioned Louisiana family that invites a young Negro minister to stay with them. True, Mr. Willis shows us many varieties of compromise with the racial issue, from villainous political expedience by a Southern Senator to the Negro's own silent acceptance of survival by means of loyal servility to one white family. Yet out of his crudely constructed and frequently unclear play a feeling does emerge that the real and probably incurable culprit is the self-corruption inherent in the way we use the ideal of "family" for our own selfish purposes.

—HENRY HEWES.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. doubtless. 2. precedent. 3. remission. 4. godfather. 5. rhapsodic. 6. titillate. 7. fantastic. 8. bastinado. 9. dormitory. 10. stipulate. 11. bilateral. 12. dissonant. 13. artifacts. 14. pessimist. 15. unexpired. 16. desperado.

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Memo from Moonville

THE OTHER SUNDAY when I should have been gamboling with the *Kinder* in the park, I found myself, instead, with a few accomplices, sitting in a shack in the wilds of Texas eating red beans and barbecued beef, dispensed, Lone Star style, with buckets of beer. It was far from a genteel Sunday lunch, but it was fortifying, and thus nourished I took off across the flatlands to visit the new Manned Spacecraft Center operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on a tract of Texas pool table about twenty-five miles out of Houston.

Although the man who will be the man in the moon will leap into space from a pad in Florida, he is training in Texas. The new NASA base will also be the nerve control center for two-man Gemini shots and the ultimate man-in-the-moon Apollo shot to follow later. Although previous space attempts have been operated from the Cape Kennedy control center, three miles from the launch pad, the brain operation has now been moved 1,100 miles to the west. The NASA people like to emphasize this was not a removal but a new move. The overriding reasons for locating a space center on the Texas prairie were manifold and had nothing to do with the proximity of Castro's rockets to Cape Kennedy, as some have inferred. For one thing, a spacecraft center had to be near a center for advanced education, and the proximity to Rice was an important factor. Secondly, the year-round weather was also a factor ruling out Boston, which had been in the running while President Kennedy was alive. Finally, the place had to be centrally located and Houston is two and a half hours or less from anywhere in the nation except perhaps San Francisco, which might take another half-hour.

Two and a half or three years ago there was nothing at the Manned Spacecraft Center but a field inhabited by a covey of cows, a fact which NASA likes to show graphically enough with a full-page picture of cows in a pasture dated May 1962. The same scene in March of 1963, also shown in NASA's brochure, depicts a modern industrial spread of a dozen buildings—and several more have risen since. The exteriors of some and the interiors of others are open to public view each Sunday afternoon, when NASA invites tourists to come in to see where their tax money is going.

The Auditorium Building—they have not exactly been christened with imagi-

native names—is a mass of glass panels and contains an 800-seat theater. Films are played for the benefit of the public all Sunday afternoon and they depict, as one might guess, the various advances we have made in our space programs. The lobby holds an exhibit center which is massed with models of spacecraft and other impedimenta of the space age. Among those exhibits that caught my fancy was a quarter-scale model of the Gemini project missile and a model of the Ranger 7 that journeyed from Cape Kennedy to the moon on July 28, 1964, landing less than ten miles from the target area after a 228,500-mile voyage. A glass-encased mock-up of Mercury Spacecraft 7 gives a firsthand view of the dials and switches that face the birdmen, and a life-sized pressure suit gives a firsthand view of what the men in the upper air are wearing this season.

DURING the first open-house weekend that NASA held last June, 55,000 gawkers advanced on the space center, all but overwhelming it. The Sundays-only program nets about 4,000 to 5,000 people, who must confine their visit to the afternoon hours from one until five. Those who come in groups, however, can arrange for special treatment. Groups are conducted through the security lines of the Mission Control Center, perhaps the most vital building in the complex. Here they can sit in a small theater and look down on the consoles which, on moon-shoot day, will be manned by NASA control people, Department of Defense recovery people, the flight control director, two doctors, and the representative of the public affairs division of NASA. At lift-off this will be the command post. It will be devoid of camera crew from commercial television simply because NASA feels it doesn't want to inhibit the actions of its flight control personnel in any way that will detract from the mission. "Our engineers," a public affairs spokesman told me, "are not actors, and therefore there are no TV cameras in the control room." There are, however, two hidden TV ducts that can tap the picture off the consoles. Presumably they could also tap the position chart, which is a projection map of the world showing all the NASA listening posts. Since the first space shots there have been some changes. There are fewer ground stations and more ships in the network. But all listening posts, wherever their location, are in voice and teletype communications with the con-

trol center. Some of them will be communicating with the familiar voice of one of the two astronaut alumni who will also man the consoles.

Besides being the command post for space shots, the Houston operation will also be involved with the development of spacecraft, the part that rides on top of the rocket. It has, as well, already assumed the training of astronauts, all of whom now live here. On the grounds are such odd boxes as the Environment Chamber, which can provide conditions similar to those of the atmosphere fifty miles in the sky. Spacecraft are placed inside the Environment Chamber and the astronauts perform exercises in removing themselves from the craft, working along the outside with guidelines, and returning. It took 1,000,000 pounds of stainless steel to build the place. Allowing for mechanical error, and then some, the Carrier people, who installed the air conditioning at the center, were required to put in one regular system plus two standby systems. In the subsequent space probes, all heavy thinking will be done on earth in the Space Center at Houston. The computers here have a memory capacity of 250,000 bits of information, but this is being extended to 500,000 bits. The Apollo project will feed 100,000 bits of information per second back to earth.

AS at Cocoa Beach, Florida, a whole metropolis is springing up around the NASA Center at Houston, providing offices, restaurants, homes, banks, and schools for those who will work to send the man to the moon. There are already 1,000 rentable rooms in three hotels, and Sheraton is expected to announce a new one this spring. The Brass Rail, a famed New York chain noted for its roast beef and corned beef sandwiches and celestial cheese cake, has moved a branch down here and opened a boozery called the Small World Club. Portofino waterfront villas are available at Swan Lagoon. A \$1,000,000,000 project called Nassau Bay will include 1,000 homes, 1,350 modern apartments, thirty town houses, fresh-water lakes, and bays for waterskiing and swimming.

Among the hotels already in operation, the Congress Inn has a heated pool with a rock garden and a sunbathing tower. Wilbur Clark, well known in Las Vegas, has brought a new Desert Inn, with a pool, gardens, and a saloon known as the Café Español. The offices of private contractors already constructed look like replicas of the Lincoln Memorial. The South West Savings Bank has installed itself on the Texas tundra in a curved-over building that resembles some modernist's dream of an adobe. It takes a heap of living to put a man on the moon.

—HORACE SUTTON.