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Simon In Performance: The Analysis And Direction Of Rumors

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Brett Olson
April 9th, 2014


TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................vi

ABSTRACT..........................................................................................................................vii

INTRODUCTION..................................................................................................................viii

CHAPTER

   I. SIMON AND COMIC TECHNIQUE...............................................................................1

   II. ANALYZING FOR PERFORMANCE.................................................................32

   III. REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS.................................................................57

WORKS CITED.....................................................................................................................67
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ABSTRACT

The direction of any theatrical production is fraught with challenges and opportunities for growth. In textual analysis and research of Neil Simon’s Rumors and directing methods, skills were developed to better direct the University of North Dakota Theatre Department’s 2014 production of Rumors. The project culminated in a well-received production of Rumors that challenged the student/actors of UND to learn a farcical style of acting and the director to stage, communicate style, and organize a fully mounted production.
INTRODUCTION

The culminating project for a Graduate Theatre student at the University of North Dakota should draw heavily from the culture in which he or she arises and contribute both practically and theoretically to the department and the individual. Under this assumption, the University of North Dakota Theatre Departments Mission Statement is important to note. Firstly, to “provide experiences that will engender an appreciation and understanding of Theatre and how it enriches our life.” This goal embodies the idea of theatre as a vehicle for its own self-promotion and life enrichment for those who take part in it. The second goal focused on the need to create work that will serve as a cultural resource for the university community and general public. For the purposes of academic theatre this project will retain the university community as a specific audience to target through theatrical endeavor.

In order to accomplish these goals this project will depend on traits embodied as a director. Those goals are organization, vision, and leadership. A reliance on organization will yield the greatest results in a field which many schedules must be considered. A highly organized director knows how to utilize all of a rehearsal period by maintaining respect of the director's own time and for the time of others. An organized director is one who may not know every answer, but has set aside time to search out any answer which might better their production. The second trait is vision, a cohesive unitary notion for all facets of a production and just as sight may be enhanced by lenses, the director's vision
will be enhanced by utilizing the collaborative views of those they work with; including all designers, actors, and managers. Finally leadership, will not be overlooked as the primary job as a director. A leader must be approachable, stalwart, and earnest in any endeavor.

This project, through analysis of Neil Simon as a playwright, research of various directing techniques, and thorough textual analysis; aims to provide a guide for the ultimate goal: the rehearsal and performance of a fully mounted production of Neil Simon's *Rumors*. This process will foster individual growth as a director and student as well as the group growth of actors, designers, and managers in the process of mounting this production. The director in the project will develop those skills already highlighted. Throughout the process moments for growth will inevitably present themselves to all of those involved in the form of design, staging, acting challenges and opportunities.

In order to accomplish this feat, three chapters will be present in this volume, the first “Simon and Comic Technique,” will first establish biographical content for Simon to create a working knowledge of his development as a playwright, content, and style, concluding with a production of history of *Rumors*. The latter half of chapter one will delve primarily into the theories of such famous 20th century voices as Stanislavsky, William Ball, Elia Kazan, Peter Brook, and Harold Clurman. The aim is to discover what each has written on the direction of comic works, for it is a unique style and must be treated as such. Ultimately a working method will be created from the different voices in order to guide the direction of *Rumors*. Chapter two, “Analyzing for Performance,” will contain an in-depth textual analysis of *Rumors* including analysis of the script as a whole
piece as well as analysis of individual characters. This portion will be based on the
Stanislavskian notions of super objectives, objectives, and tactics. Chapter three,
“Reflections On The Process,” will comment on what practices were successful and not.
CHAPTER I

SIMON AND COMIC TECHNIQUE

Few American Playwrights have reached the level of proliferation that can be claimed by Neil Simon. Having written well over 20 plays, numerous screenplays, and television shows, Simon has made a quite public name that transcends the bounds on many artists whose work is confined to the realm of theatre. Known primarily for his comedy, Simon's formulaic approach to writing has garnered him mixed to good reviews, critically; albeit continued commercial success. According to Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present, Simon's 1965 Tony Award for Best Author of a Play for The Odd Couple and having had four comedies simultaneously running on Broadway in 1966 made his fame through the avenue of comedy; however, Simon is a playwright who continues to stylistically challenge himself with each new endeavor. The semi-autobiographical Biloxi Blues won the 1985 Tony for Best Play and his dramatic entry Lost in Yonkers won the 1991 Pulitzer Prize in Drama, the highest award in American literature, along with the Tony Award for Best Play (“An Interview with Neil Simon,” in Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1991, pp. 153-76). He has also delved into tragicomedy with Jakes Women, and briefly into farce with Rumors.

Neil Simon was born on July fourth, 1927 into a family of three including his mother, Mamie; father, Irving; and older brother, Danny. Though born in the Bronx, New York, most of Simon's childhood was spent in the Manhattan neighborhood of
Washington Heights, New York. In Simon's autobiography, *Rewrites*, Simon describes his father as “a piece goods salesmen (who) mostly told jokes. Dirty jokes. Moron jokes … Anything that would get a laugh and would make the swatch buyers smile when Irving Simon walked into their showrooms” (28). His mother, Mamie, was “born … in the Harlem section of New York around 1900” (Simon 29). Simon goes on to characterize his mother by way of the following anecdote:

“I have no exact date of her birth because she herself never knew. She told us she knew she was born on the second night of Rosh Hashanah, a holiday marking the beginning of the Jewish New Year. The second night of Rosh Hashanah would give you no clearer date of your birth than if you said you were born six days after the World Series (29).

She was a woman with few certainties in life, but Simon concludes that “she was a good woman and as hard-working as any mother could possibly be” (30).

Depression era New York was the backdrop for his parent's relationship. During Simon's childhood years the taxing environment caused much strife between his parents and they were often separated. Simon counts the total in saying “my father left and separated from my mother at least eight times during my childhood” (30). These periods of time were usually incited by Irving leaving and the two boys were left alone with Mother Mamie. This harrowing time has been cited by Simon as the basis for his formulation as a comedian. In an interview with James Lipton, Simon said of his childhood “My mother and father's constant breakups seemed to show little concern for my brother and me” when his parents were separated the boys would often stay with
other family “It was like coming from five broken families,” this in turn led to an early use of humor as a coping mechanism. This is later suggested by Simon: “I needed to exorcise, whether it’s humorous or painful. Generally, painful. Maybe the humor is to cover the pain up or maybe it’s a way to share the experience with someone” (Paris Review). Simon also offers his parents inconsistent and damaging relationship as a catalyst for his career path stating in an interview with Lawrence Grobel,

“It’s partly why I became a writer, because I learned to fend for myself very early... I began to think early on, at the age of seven or eight, that I’d better start taking care of myself somehow, emotionally.... It made me strong as an independent person” (Grobel 378).

Despite emotional and financial hardship, Simon graduated high school at the age of 16 from Dewitt High School in 1943. Following his graduation he promptly joined the Air Force Reserve during a short time spent at New York University, through which he arrived at Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado and from 1945 to 1946 continued his education at the University of Colorado (The Jewish Chronicle Online).

His time spent at the Lowry Air Force Base introduced Simon to professional writing as a sports columnist, it was not until moving back to Manhattan to work with his older brother that Simon began his climb towards commercial success. After moving back to Manhattan, he spent two years working as mail clerk at Warner Brothers before committing to writing full time with his brother Danny. Lawrence Grobel writes in his book, *Endangered Species: Writers Talk About Their Craft, Their Visions, Their Lives*, that this marked the beginning Simon's professional career. During this time he wrote for
radio with *The Robert Q Lewis Show* and attended a writing workshop for CBS conducted by Goodman Ace, a popular radio humorist at the time. *The Robert Q Lewis Show* opened the door to Simon's next prominent job on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*. Caesar requested that the Simons write for his television series and in turn became a mentor of Simon. Grobel goes on to cite Simon's suggestion that "between the two of them [Goodman Ace and Sid Caesar] I spent five years and learned more about what I was eventually going to do than in any other previous experience." The next stage of Neil Simon's career would be that of playwriting and its transportation of him into the public eye.

In order to garner a critical understanding of a playwright as prolific as Simon, this work will now explore his creation as a playwright and subsequently, his style. To effectively analyze all of Simon's works would be a grand undertaking; however, in search of brevity and possibly the clearest representation of Simon, research will be presented on *Come Blow Your Horn*, *Barefoot in the Park*, and *Lost in Yonkers*. These pieces have been chosen because of their unique places in the various stages of Simon's career. As his first play, *Come Blow Your Horn* presents an invaluable opportunity to the aspects of Simon's development as a playwright and his playwriting process. *Barefoot in the Park* will be the next play discussed, primarily for it's stature as Simon's longest running hit. Finally, the Pulitzer Prize winning *Lost in Yonkers* will be addressed for the depth which can be found in the writing of Simon. For the full listing of Simon's plays and dates of their runs, see Appendix A.

In Simon's introduction to his autobiography, *Rewrites*, Simon writes that the
“Rewrites reflects the formative and possibly the most exciting stages of my life” (12). Rewrites begins chronicling his life and work in the spring of 1957, the time during which he began work on his first play, Come Blow Your Horn. Come Blow Your Horn marks the beginning of Simon's playwriting career and is therefore important to the creation of Simon's process. In order to create a viable image of the formulation of his playwriting process, this work now aims to discuss the creative process, audience reception, and critical reception of Come Blow Your Horn.

Simon began working on the first draft on October 15, 1957. He recalls his passion and purpose for the work: “The subject was my third priority. Number two on my list was a desire to write for Broadway. Number one – and this was my dominating motivation, far and above all others – was a desperate and abiding need to get out of television” (16). This dominating motivation was hinged on the fervent desire of Simon and then wife Joan to return to New York City at a time when television was primarily centered in California. Simon suggests that money was never a great desire of the couple; however when in April of that year their daughter Ellen was born, cost of family support increased and the importance of money greatened. The family had no choice but to relocate to Hollywood in order for Simon to take a job writing for Jerry Lewis. Writing for Lewis was not nearly as taxing as some of his previous jobs and his work load lightened considerably. It was during a five week hiatus while still employed by Lewis that Simon and Joan had the following conversation:

Joan: Why don't you start that play you're always talking about?

Simon: I don't have a play that I'm always talking about, I just want to write one.
Joan: So think of one.

Simon: Think of a play? A whole play? With a beginning, middle, and end? Do you have any idea how hard that is? It would take me two or three years at least. And what if it isn't any good? What would we do for money?

Joan: We'll get by. Just write the play (Simon 25-26).

The work on Simon's first play, then titled *One Shoe Off* began two days later. The play underwent extensive rewrites, in the first week Simon recalls “eighteen pages suddenly (getting) distilled into three pages” (35). The title also changed twice before Simon would settle on *Come Blow Your Horn*. It took Simon three years to finish his first play. During this time he would devote his nights to the project while maintaining his day job of writing television sketches for *The Red Buttons Show, The Phil Silvers Show, Caesar's Hour,* and *The Gary Moore Show*.

In 1959, after 18 drafts that revamped everything from clarifying a character's destination when leaving the stage to making certain that all of the characters meet during the span of the play, Simon came to a stopping point. He sent the script to the influential director, Herman Shumlin, in hopes of feedback. Simon cites Shumlin's critique that the play “had no construction. It's just funny dialogue broken up by scene changes” (48). Taking the criticism and noting the similarities between the character's relationship and he and his brother's, Simon further worked the piece.

In 1960 *Come Blow Your Horn* premiered at The Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania. This successful summerstock try out led to an opportunity in Philadelphia at The Walnut Theatre, and an eventual production at the Brooks Atkinson
Theater on Broadway. The Walnut Theater Production sold out for “three and a half weeks” and garnered the approval of Ernie Schier, whom Simon says “had the most clout” (Simon 70-71). Simon goes on to cite Schier's review in which he states “Come Blow Your Horn contains some of the funniest writing and situations since Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman were pounding out their Broadway hits” (72). The Broadway production began Simon's lifelong relationship with critics and audiences. Come Blow Your Horn managed to please the masses while getting mixed to good reviews from the critics, a mantra that would follow much of his work. Simon offers the The New York Times review which stated that “In Come Blow Your Horn, Neil Simon has put together and old-fashioned Broadway product that seemed to have gone out of fashion – a slick, lively, funny comedy”, concluding that “best of all, he has provided some explosively hilarious moments rooted in character” (77). Alternately John McClain of the Journal-American said “the audience at the opening of Come Blow Your Horn whistled, screamed, and all but tore up the seats in approval of this new comedy by Neil Simon. And indeed, it is funny – but it isn't that funny” (Simon 78). These reviews mark the beginning of the aforementioned pattern of Simon's receptions. Aside from critics, Simon says that the best publicity he received for Come Blow Your Horn came from a bit of reporting done by Leonard Lyons of the New York Post. In his column which Simon describes as full of “generally amusing stories of the rich, the famous, the talented and the notorious” Lyons wrote:

“Noel Coward looked up from his chili con carne while Irving 'Swifty' Lazar noticed that his eggs benedict looked like a Picasso. I've just just seen the funniest
play in New York,' said Noel. 'Swifty, dear boy, what was the name of it?' 'Come Blow Your Horn,' Lazar said as he cut into his priceless Picasso” (Simon 82).

This commendation from Coward in conjunction from a later Lyons quoting of Groucho Marx further catapulted the play's popularity via word of mouth. The Marx quote: “I laughed my head off at Come Blow Your Horn. And for me that's an improvement”, is referred to by Simon as a contributing factor to the play “[running] for close to two years, at never much more than at half capacity, but (paying) off and then some” (Simon 82-83). Come Blow Your Horn was a financial success and enjoyed a run of 678 performances.

From the critical reviews and Simon's recollections of Come Blow Your Horn, the basis for Simon's playwriting style has begun to emerge. His is work that features many rewrites, a desire for the best possible product, and is loved by audiences. Critics praise his ability to focus on situation and character, while simultaneously noting in the case of Come Blow Your Horn, that “it isn't much of a play” (The New York Mirror). Also worthy of mention is the way Simon drew upon his personal relationships as the basis for his characters.

After the success of Come Blow Your Horn, Simon followed up with his longest running play, Barefoot In The Park in 1963. According to Simon it was “the play [he] started writing about Joan” (104) and was close to the favorite play he has written saying “Barefoot in the Park was about as much fun as a playwright like me could have” (139). Barefoot in the Park is a romantic comedy that features two main characters, Corie and Paul Bratter, and follows their first days as a recently married couple. The couple lives in an apartment five stories up in Greenwich Village and the play chronicles their learning
to live together in harmony. This apartment presented the main obstacle to the couple.
Simon describes the problems of the apartment as ones which he and Joan had faced in their “real lives” saying that including the climb of five flights of stairs “the water had not been turned on as yet, there was a hole in the skylight, there was no tub, just a shower, and on a cold day in February, the heat didn't work” (105).

Like *Come Blow Your Horn*, *Barefoot* previewed at Bucks County Playhouse and according to Simon “from the moment the curtain went up on the first performance at Bucks County until it fell at the end of the play, there was nonstop laughter” (136). The production then had a brief engagement in New Haven before moving to New York. *Barefoot* opened on Broadway at the Biltmore Theater on October 23, 1963. Of the Broadway production Walter Kerr of the New York *Herald-Tribune* wrote, “The curtain goes up on an empty apartment and Mr. Simon proceeds to fill it up with a play … Mr. Simon arrives at exactly what's meant by entertainment.” The *Journal-American* critic, John McClain simply wrote “*Barefoot in the Park* is the funniest comedy I can remember – it's as simple as that.” Simon writes in *Rewrites* that he believes *Barefoot's* success hinged on Mike Nichols' direction and the performances of Robert Redford as Paul and Elizabeth Ashley as Corie. Simon recounts an early rehearsal facilitated by Nichols:

“I watched bits and pieces from the darkened corners at the rear of the theatre and began to see what Mike had done. He had turned the play from artifice to believability. Whatever the actors did seemed natural. Whatever they said seemed like words they themselves had thought of … We were able to see the love and laughter through their pain but they were unaware of it … They were living it”
Simon was astonished by what he saw and told Nichols that he was uncomfortable watching the rehearsal because it was “too private” to which Nichols responded “Good. Then it's working” (Simon 135). *Barefoot in the Park* closed on June 25, 1967 after four years and 1,530 performances. The production won Mike Nichols a Tony Award for Best Director and won Simon the reputation of a staying success.

Finally, *Lost in Yonkers* must be observed for it's place in the history of Simon. It is necessary to start with the honors that *Yonkers* garnered so that they may inform any summation offered about the piece itself. In 1991 *Lost in Yonkers* won the Drama Desk Award for Best New Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as well as Tony Awards for Best Play, Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Play, Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play, and Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Play.

*Lost in Yonkers* is a play which chronicles the growth of Jay Kurnitz, a fifteen year old boy who watches over his little brother, Arty and lives with his grandmother and Aunt in Yonkers, New York. Jay's mother is dead and his father, Eddie, is often traveling. Eddie works as a traveling salesmen and is trying to pay off the debts tolled during the last months of his wife's life. The boy's grandmother is frightening and obtuse. She is the mother of Eddie, Jay's Uncle Louie, Aunt Bella, and Aunt Gert. Each of these characters has been affected in some way by the callous nature in which they were raised by Jay's grandmother. The action of the piece follows Jay and Arty's year spent with Grandma Kurnitz. During this time Jay convinces Aunt Bella to stand up to Grandma, which she does, leaving Jay and Arty alone with Grandma. Left to the abuse of Grandma, Jay


Simon's style has developed and changed throughout the years however he has always been clear that his plays are about dilemmas. This creates a hierarchy within his creative process of writing, with the dilemma being the key catalyst in a dramatic work, as Simon suggests in the James Lipton interview:

“I *think* about thematic plays but I don’t believe I write them. Nothing really takes shape until I become specific about the character and the dilemma he’s in. *Dilemma* is the key word. It is always a dilemma, not a situation. To tell the truth, I really don’t know what the theme of the play is until I’ve written it and the critics tell me ("The Paris Review." *Paris Review*).

Though a dilemma is a category of situation, more reliance is placed on the jeopardy in which the characters are placed. Simon uses this piece of rhetoric to guard against stale writing and playing for a specific theme is entirely secondary and arises organically without a specific aim. In order to serve the dilemma, Simon draws upon his well of
personal experiences, systematic use of humor, and audience identification.

It was earlier alluded to that Simon draws heavily upon his personal experience when writing, and though characters and events may not be verbatim representations of memory, they often serve as seeds for the dilemma. *Broadway Bound* has been stated by Simon to be the most autobiographical saying “I did tell about the fights and what it was like for me as a kid hearing them” and concluding that “I didn’t realize until someone said after the first reading that the play was really a love letter to my mother! She suffered the most in all of it. She was the one that was left alone” (*Paris Review*).

The systematic use of humor is something Simon has honed to a science. Rather than writing jokes, or playing at them, the ultimate goal in his work is logic; therefore, when Simon states “the thing I always do is play back on things I set up without any intention in the beginning” and “The foundation of the play is set in those first fifteen or twenty minutes” (*Paris Review*) he is defining the beginning of a system which serves his dilemma. The audience is first introduced to the static situation and all of the elements within it before being expected to “laugh” at it. In having this firm foundation, Simon is free to recall back to those earlier given circumstances to play them for laughter. The audience is allowed to use their own logic so that when something is repeated two and three times, the comic effect is greater. Simon offers an anecdote about his method in the following excerpt:

“In *Broadway Bound*, when Stan is teaching Eugene the craft of comedy, Eugene says, ‘It’s just a comedy sketch. Does it have to be so logical? We’re not drawing the plans for the Suez Canal,’ and Stan says, ‘Yes we are. It’s not funny if it’s not
believable”” (*Paris Review*).

Continuing the process of logic and writing, Simon uses a system for the utilization by the directors who produce his plays via use of different punctuation. While it has become a popular practice for directors, influenced by the notions of Edward Gordon Craig and Constantin Stanislavski, to overlook stage directions and certain punctuation in search for a more “organic” rehearsal process; Simon has indicated that this neo-tradition is actually not useful to his plays. On ellipses, italics, and all caps, Simon has said “They are the first indication to the actor and the director” further describing that these punctuations are of a certain importance. The ellipses guide the actor to pause, the italics an amount of emphasis, the all caps indicate a heightened emphasis (*Paris Review*). Along with the punctuation, Simon favors the notion of the percussive “K” sound and places it in both character names and punchlines for it's ability to “cut through the theater” (Lipton NP).

Upon further prompting, Simon goes on to offer some advice to those who might direct his works in the following excerpt:

> “You don’t know where the laughs are until you get in front of an audience. Most of the biggest laughs I’ve ever had I never knew were big laughs. Mike Nichols used to say to me, Take out all the little laughs because they hurt the big ones. Sometimes the little laughs aren’t even meant to be laughs. I mean them to further the play, the plot, the character, the story (Lipton NP).

These notes to the acting ensemble should be taken into consideration, and if taken as a guide rather than a demand, they will likely benefit most productions.

Most of those who read or see Simon's plays will note the use of joke repetition.
Simon alludes to the following premises in the Lipton interview (Paris Review). It is not unlikely to witness the same joke being reiterated two and or three times. This allows the audience to be logically introduced to the joke in its first setting and enjoy the development of the humor through its natural position in the dilemma of the piece. This rule of three can be better understood by analyzing a scene from Rumors. The scene occurs toward the end of the second act and features the men at the dinner party playing a game to decide which of them will pose as their absent host, Charlie. The comedy hinges upon heightening the circumstances of the dilemma. At the door are two policemen that could spell disaster for the members of the dinner party. It is imperative that the four men playing the game believe their lives and livelihoods are at stake and the only solution is to play this juvenile game. This creates a juxtaposition between very serious consequences to a very silly game. The first joke in the scene is the game itself, the second the condemnation of Lenny, and the third is the reaction of Lenny to his condemnation.

The first joke is set up in a sequence of repetitions. These achieve the greatest comic effect if they are heightened each time with more intensity through speed, volume, and the four men's reactions to the result of each repetition. Ken narrates the game:

Glenn: Come on. Let's get it over with, for crissakes.

Ken: Okay. Here we go. One-two-three! (The men put out fingers) Two and two. No good... Try again. Ready? One-two-three! (The men put out fingers).

All the same. No good...Again! (The doorbell rings) Ready? One-two-three! (The men put out fingers) Aha! Lenny!

Lenny: (Quickly putting his hand behind his back) What do you mean Lenny?

This joke is very physical and Lenny, Glenn, and Ernie are manifestations of the tension in this children's game. The repetition at use here is of the lines “One-two-three” and the physical gestures of the men. The punchline of the joke happens after the third repetition of the game when Lenny hides his losing hand behind his back. This is the physical punchline to a series of heightened repetitions.

The second joke is the condemnation of Lenny:

Glenn: We all have two finger out, you have one finger.

Lenny: Bullshit! I had two stuck together. (*He shows them*) I got duck grease on my fingers.

Ernie: It was one finger, Lenny.

Lenny: It was two, I swear to God.

Ernie: No, no. It was one. ONE. FINGER. ONE! I SAW IT!! (Simon 111).

Lenny defends himself with a running gag about duck grease which serves both as a one-liner and a heightening of the condemnation joke. Simon's writing is full of one-liners which must be waded through to heighten current jokes. It is important to reiterate Simon's advice to “take out all the little laughs because they hurt the big ones” to serve the big laugh. More important than Lenny's one-liner is the recognition of Ernie. This joke works by virtue of Glenn's set up, Lenny's heightening, and the strength and explosion of Ernie's recognition. Ernie's punchline, “ONE. FINGER. ONE! I SAW IT!!” is also heightened by capitalization, another technique of Simon's. By virtue of the textual clues it is hypothetically the biggest laugh of the scene.
The final joke is Lenny's reaction to his condemnation and is started with a one-liner from Cookie.

Cookie: And that man graduated from Johns Hopkins.

Glenn: Go on upstairs, Lenny. And don't come down unless we call you.

Lenny: *italicized* I had a better time in my car accident.

*(He goes into Charley's room and closes the door. The doorbell rings again)*

(Simon 111).

Cookie's line “And that man graduated from Johns Hopkins” is referring to Ernie and how far Lenny has pushed him, but it is also the set up for Lenny's reaction. It is heightened by Glenn telling Lenny to go upstairs and pretend to be Charley. The punchline of the joke is Lenny's line “I had a better time in my car accident” (Simon 111). It is accentuated by an indignant cross offstage. Lenny's punchline is written in italics and in accordance with Simon's textual hierarchy it should receive more emphasis than un-affected text, but still less than something written in all capitalized letters. Therefore three different jokes with different structures and punchlines have been addressed. The first focused on physical repetition, the second on an extremely heightened punchline, and the third serves as sort of a bookend to the trio of jokes ending with an italicized line and an indignant cross offstage.

Now that the background and structure of Simon's writing has been discussed this work next moves to peruse his content. Drawing upon personal experience is a strong part of creating characters, but Simon is the first to mention the importance of fully realizing each character saying “When you write a play, maybe even a novel, you become
everybody” further postulating that “It may seem like I only write the lines spoken by the character who is like Neil Simon” this is in fact not true, says Simon, defending his position by explaining that “in Lost in Yonkers I’m also the grandmother—and Bella. And to do that you have to become that person. That’s the adventure, the joy, the release that allows you to escape from your own boundaries” (Paris Review). All of the characters in Simon's works are designed to serve the dilemma, be realized as truths he has found in personal life, and provide an “escape from your own boundaries” (Paris Review).

While the previously discussed addends, such as emphasis of dilemma, repetition, and textual instructions to actors and directors maintain a certain essence in much of Simon's work, it would be an error to assert that “writing jokes” or “playing for humor” is the chief describer when speaking of Simon. Although he has said that he does not write “thematic” plays, it may be that the use of humor is the theme in and of itself. Just as Simon has described his development as a playwright and humorist as somewhat of a mechanical defensive response to his parent's relationship, he describes sharing humor with an audience in the following way “That, more or less, is what is funny to me—saying something that’s instantly identifiable to everybody... It’s a shared secret between you and the audience” (Paris Review). In this way, the theme often found in Simon's works may very well be the transcendental status humor is able to achieve when it is shaped in such a way to reveal basic commonalities in human nature.

Much time thus far has been spent providing a picture of how Simon describes his own work, it is necessary, however, to provide an analysis of his contemporaries and critics to create an accurate image of his style. A further goal is to narrow the scope of
this analysis from all of Simon's works to *Rumors* for the sake of the rest of this volume; therefore, the next portion of this research will focus on a production history of *Rumors*. First an in-depth synopsis of the play will be offered, second Simon's reactions to the play, and lastly critical reviews and a production history. First and foremost, an offering from the playwright:

“*Rumors* was the most difficult play I ever wrote because not only did every moment of that play have to further the story, complicate it and keep the characters in motion—*literal* motion, swinging in and out of doors— but the audience had to laugh at every attempt at humor. You don’t have five minutes where two people can sit on a sofa and just say, What am I doing with my life, Jack? Am I crazy? Why don’t I get out of this? You can do that in a drama. You can’t do it in a farce” (*Paris Review*).

It is something to note that Simon has called this “the most difficult” of plays he has written and treat the process of considering such a piece with due respect.

*Rumors* is a farce that follows several wealthy couples and their navigation of a dinner party which is intended celebrate the tenth anniversary of Charlie and Myra Brock. The dilemma these guests face is the fact that Charlie and Myra are missing. The first guests to arrive at the dinner party are the Gormans, Ken and Chris. Ken and Chris discover that Myra and the kitchen staff are nowhere to be found and Charlie is lying in his bed unconscious after shooting himself in the ear. The second couple is Lenny and Claire Ganz. The two victims of a car accident on their way to the party and Lenny is
suffering from an extremely tender neck. It is at this point that the play's namesake appears. Ken and Chris have left the living room and Claire and Lenny waste no time before they start discussing rumors about Charlie and Myra's relationship and the possible infidelities of which they may be guilty. Nonplussed, they confront Ken who finally reveals to them the true dilemma of the dinner party. The next guests arrive before anything else can happen. Ernie and Cookie Cusack enter the fray and are almost immediately harassed by the sound of a gunshot (Simon, Neil. *Rumors: A Farce*. New York: Random House, 1990. Print).

After the shocking sound Ken appears from Charlie's upstairs bedroom and beckons Chris, leaving Lenny to distract the Cusacks. It is revealed that there was no foul play and that while Ken was taking the gun away he tripped on Charlie's slippers fired the gun on accident. The loud blast has made him almost deaf. The Cusacks have decided to prepare dinner in lieu of the missing staff when the final guests arrive. They are the attractive Coopers, Glenn and Cassie. It is revealed in their first scene together that the two have an extremely argumentative relationship, but like everyone else, they are afraid of rumors. Act I culminates in a cacophony of misfortune. Nearly simultaneously the Cusacks come out with a hastily prepared dinner, Cassie screams at Glenn, Chris trips on a telephone wire, Lenny's already injured neck goes out, Cookie has a back spasm, and Ken is oblivious to all of the action because of his hearing loss (Simon, Neil. *Rumors: A Farce*. New York: Random House, 1990. Print).

Act II begins with all of the couples finishing dinner and the details of their joint dilemma is revealed to all of the guests. Ken is blamed for their plight, Cassie continues
her harassment of Glenn by flirting with Ken and brings back Ken's hearing by 
unromantically shouting into his ears. The action rushes along with the arrival of a police 
car outside.

At this point the guests create a convoluted guise to fool the police officers. They 
mutually decide to pretend that nothing suspicious is happening and finish off the 
deception by impersonating each other so no one's true identity can be revealed to the 
police. Lenny, losing out on the men's game, is chosen to portray the incapacitated 
Charlie. With Lenny busy, Ken must take the place of Lenny. Officer Welch enters the 
house to find the guests frantically dancing to “La Bamba,” he becomes frustrated with 
the unclarity of the guest's story, but eventually reveals that he is only there to follow up 
on the car accident Lenny suffered on the way to the party. As the officers are on their 
way out of the house, Glenn blows the guest's cover by mentioning a gunshot, and 
Officer Welch asks to see the mysteriously absent Charlie.

Lenny comes downstairs dressed in Charlie's bath robe and concocts an extremely 
long monologue during which he ties up all of the loose ends the guest's story. The story 
ranges from Myra being locked in the basement to Lenny/Charlie's inability to speak 
Spanish. It is nearly incoherent, but by the end of it, the officers accept the story for truth 
and take leave. The play ends with the happily saved dinner guests attempting to go 
upstairs to get the true version of events from Charlie, who has miraculously awakened, 
but they are stopped when they hear pounding from the basement door where Myra has 
been locked away the entire time.

Simon was already a huge success by the time Rumors was being written and had
recently won a Tony for Best Play for *Biloxi Blues*. As suggested, the main challenge was created due to the nature of the farce. No longer can one rely solely on Simon's method of establishing humor in a timely fashion. The frenetic nature of a farce demands the need of a tightly logical chain of events in order to give the humor legitimacy while not encumbering the tempo. But perhaps in order to make such claims, a definition for farce should be utilized to clearly separate it from comedy. According to *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, farce “makes use of excessively complicated plots, improbable situations, and type characterization” (Hurrel, John D. "A Note on Farce." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 45.4 (1959): 426-430. Print). Hurrel goes on to note that “it is highly unrealistic and highly ephemeral” yet concludes and gives weight to the style in stating that “farce has enjoyed great popularity during several long periods of dramatic history; it has occupied the attention of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Moliere, and Wilde, to name but four major dramatists” (426).

A likelihood emerges that Simon was not trying to write a piece aesthetically inferior to his previous works or he would not have identified it as such a challenge. This essay argues that while farce has certain elements that may identify it as improbable and therefore slightly incompatible with Simon's style of humor, *Rumors* had to maintain plausibility to utilize Simon's strength as a writer of humor. This very dichotomy lends itself to a discussion of critical reviews and interviews. Prior to the show opening on Broadway, Mervyn Rothstein of the *New York Times* conducted an interview with Mr. Simon with the goal of creating a sense of *Rumors*. Rothstein invites Simon to share his feeling of *Rumors* and the process of writing it, whereupon Simon speaks of the
completed work as the play being about couples "keeping information from the other couples," and

"Then it keeps getting more and more complicated. I guess if there's any kind of theme at all, it was the theme of rumors - how rumors can often come close to destroying friendships, even marital relationships. Because sometimes there is a basis to the rumors, and sometimes they're just twisted. I think we've all been victims of rumors, and they're very hurting" (Nytimes.com).

Once written, *Rumors* found its premier at San Diego, California's Old Globe Theatre on September 22, 1988. This production met with moderate success and two months later opened on Broadway on November 17, 1988 at the Broadhurst Theatre, eventually transferring to the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and enjoying a long run of 535 performances and eight previews. While not garnering any writing awards, the production was meritorious in other categories such as the Tony Award for Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play for Christine Baranski's portrayal of Chris Gorman and a Drama Desk Award Nomination for Outstanding Costume Design for Joseph G. Aulisi ("List of 1989 Tony Award Winners", *The Associated Press*, June 5, 1989, Domestic News).

After its time spent in San Diego and shortly into the Broadway run, Dan Sullivan of the *LA Times* compiled several critiques of the play ranging from praise to poison. In the article Sullivan cites *The New York Post, The Daily News, The New York Times,* and *Newsday* in their reviews of the 1988 production. Clive Barnes of the *New York Post* called the play "light, frothy and fun. It is as significant as a cream puff and just about as
nourishing. But beautifully baked and cunningly filled” while Howard Kissell of The Daily News suggested that Rumors “showed Simon writing to get a laugh, however thoughtless, every 2 minutes, rather than writing to say something about people, as in his autobiographical Brighton Beach plays.” Both of these reviews are somewhat juxtaposed to Simon's self-described emphasis on audience identification with real situations.

Sullivan goes on to cite Frank Rich of the New York Times as being indifferent about the play by virtue of his statement: "Mr. Simon never creates the real sense of jeopardy necessary to make his premise spin into a riotous plot. Rather than do the exacting work required to craft a farce, he casually empties out a file cabinet's worth of often tangentially relevant jokes.” Sullivan concludes his research with a report on Newsdays Linda Winer who gave the show her approval. In regards to the plot she suggests, "the stakes do not seem high enough; however, there is much to recommend the evening. The characters are sharply drawn and the 10-actor cast gives itself over completely to the nonsense at hand” (Sullivan, Dan. "Neil Simon's 'Rumors' Lands on Broadway Among Mixed Reviews." Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles Times, 19 Nov. 1988. Web. 24 Aug. 2013).

Despite these mixed to negative reviews, Simon's popularity combined with a long run on Broadway have kept Rumors in production around the country, most recently in April of 2013 in Baltimore, Maryland and March of 2013 in Portland, Oregon. The Twin Beach Players of Baltimore's production is reviewed by Mark Beachy, who was quick to perceive “It is interesting to note that Simon has given the four wives names that begin with C – Chris, Claire, Cookie, and Cassie” an homage to Simon's earlier
discovered preference for the “K” sound. Similar problems are noted about the script twenty years after the original production when Beachy states “character development seems all too absent from the script. Simon never creates the real sense of jeopardy and urgency necessary to make me worry or care about the central character Charlie Brock” (Maryland Theatre Guide). On the opposite side of the country comes Hughly Marty of The Oregonian's take on Rumors. Marty expresses his opinion immediately with the title of the article, “Lakewood Theatre Review: 'Rumors' of Anything Funny in This Neil Simon Comedy Prove Unfounded.” Within the piece Marty besmirches the play saying “Simon’s writing here is so sloppy and tedious, so stuffed with jokes yet so lacking in wit, so dismissive of its own internal logic, so pointlessly repetitive that it beggars the imagination of anyone actually paying attention” (The Oregonian).

Neil Simon has developed a reputation amongst America’s critics and audiences over the last fifty years. Of his work, it is most noticeable by his own suggestion that he almost exclusively draws from personal experience and inspiration, tries to write for logic rather and laughs, and prescribes to the notion of repetition for the sake of humor. All of these elements must serve the dilemma in which the characters are currently entangled. Through these techniques Simon has frequently achieved his thematic goal of audience identification. His foray into farce was met with mixed reviews which often highlighted a lack of “jeopardy” for the characters. This was often described as a problem with the writing itself, but the productions of Rumors have been commercially successful and audiences have generally enjoyed the experience.

Now that a working understanding of Simon as a playwright has been established,
the latter half of this chapter will deal with the theories of directing which pertain to overcoming the unique obstacles inherent in directing the comedy of Neil Simon. More specifically the farce of *Rumors* will be the subject of investigation. Starting broadly and working towards specific goals has been the preferred method of mimesis thus far and will continue with a perusal of some basic notions of directing before delving into comedy.

William Ball, noted Artistic Director of The American Conservatory Theatre has created concise and usable definitions in his book, *A Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing*, which are based on the *Poetics* of Aristotle and will be the basis for the rest of this section. Ball has described in his book the idea of the “Predominant Element.” He suggests five possibilities (drawn from the *Poetics*) “The predominant elements are theme, plot, character, spectacle, and language (Ball 27). Ball suggests that a director must be able to understand which of these elements are the most important in any play in order to focus on them in rehearsal. The farcical nature of *Rumors* immediately suggests plot as a “predominant element.” For Ball, plot is a predominant element in any play that features “action that hurls itself relentlessly at the audience mowing down all before it” (Ball 27). Working in conjunction with plot in *Rumors* is spectacle. Ball describes spectacle in the following way: “spectacle: sheer intensity and speed unrelenting energy, the nonstop sensation of movement, sound, and color, the surprises (Ball 28). These describers can be found throughout the action of *Rumors*. Finally, somewhat opposed to Simon's other works and their attempt at developing logical characters and events, the farce of *Rumors* lends itself to “language:
poetry at it's dazzling... (with) characters sketched not developed” (Ball 28). While language may not have been Simon's immediate intent in writing Rumors, the play's end product in conjunction with critical reviews of the piece indicate that language has become a predominant element of the play.

To focus on character or theme when mounting a production of Rumors would be folly and lead to feared “lack of jeopardy” for the characters as described by the critics. The method of acting chosen to be utilized must also be heightened to compliment the appropriate elements. If a director highlights an overtly psychological approach for character development, the awareness of the external action may become lost. This idea proves to be divergent from basic Stanislavskian actor training, which is alluded to by Robert Benedetti in his book The Actor in You: Sixteen Simple Steps to Understanding the Art of Acting in his saying “to achieve spontaneity you must keep your awareness on your objective rather than on the mechanics of the external action” to avoid “going through the motions - repeating the external aspects of your performance without re-experiencing the internal needs that drive externals” (112). Also the possibility strengthens of alienating an audience and preventing them from experiencing the humor via identification.

Ball's prescriptions about predominant elements are strengthened by famous director Harold Clurman in his On Directing. Clurman describes the fundamental skills of directing in the following way: “the basic tenets of direction remain the same for all productions. Only emphases change, that is, styles... What counts is the director's vision and temperament” (Clurman 168). This is not to say that the director is without an individual artistic influence on a given production, Elia Kazan bolsters this notion in
saying “the director's first question in approaching a script is not what the author intended, but what is his own response as an independent artist” (Kazan on Directing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Print). One must note the physical blocks have been given them, such as Neil Simon's writing of Rumors, noting in it what the predominant elements Simon saw and eventually through research and vision choose elements on which to focus based on an individual reaction to the work.

Directing with humor in mind is intimidating in its seemingly simplistic demands, first and most important of which is to make the audience laugh. But how does one go about accomplishing this task? This work will now look toward Stanislavski's student Toporkov for an answer:

“The less you try, the better you reach your audience. What does 'try harder' mean? It means trying to woo the audience, that the audience is your object. That is one of an actor's greatest vices. It is better not to notice the audience than to 'woo' it” (Toporkov, Vasiliĭ Osipovich, and Jean Benedetti. Stanislavski in Rehearsal. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print).

If, as Toporkov suggests, “wooing... the audience is one of an actor's great vices” does that transcend the actor and guide the director as well? Yes, the goal may be to make the audience laugh and it is the director's job to consider the audience. Consideration is not synonymous with pandering. Steps must be taken to avoid this pratfall and serve the communion that takes place between the entire ensemble and the audience. Steps have already been taken to serve the production and in turn serve the audience. Already decided upon are the predominant elements which must be focused on during the
rehearsal of *Rumors*; plot, spectacle, and language. This work now argues that to make these elements as concise as possible will be through the control of the tool Simon provides: comedy.

Once again William Ball will be drawn upon by delving into his guidelines for the direction of comedy. The first advice Ball gives is to “play the first ten minutes straight” finishing with “once the audience is involved and cares about the characters, then comedic material will begin to rise out of the interplay of character and situation” (164). This is in accordance to Simon's style of writing. Whereas Simon prefers returning to the first twenty minutes of a script for his exposition and basis of repetitive jokes, Ball furthers the reliance on these first twenty minutes in refusing the acting ensemble the temptation of “playing for a laugh” in an initial insecurity. The early gained momentum will not last through the entirety of the run. Of greater importance is the creation of a willing suspension of disbelief. The real challenge in incorporating this notion into a farce like *Rumors* is the need to maintain a fast tempo while creating commitment on stage to the very real jeopardy by which the characters are faced. Ball reinforces this idea by determining that “the truly skillful comedy director must appear to be disinterested in the laughter of the audience. If he is discovered to be in blatant and hungry pursuit of laughter, he loses his credentials” (170). This warning immediately piques the interest of the young director, who now is aghast at the ample opportunities for failure. In response Ball reassures by saying that which Simon has suggested but in different words: “Always play the situation, always enhance the situation, always drive the situation to the limit” (165). Ball's emphasis on the situation is akin to Simon's dependence on the dilemma, this
is an instance in which rhetoric may become an obstacle. For the sake of respecting Simon, this research will refer to what Ball calls situation by Simon's suggested terminology, dilemma. This essay argues that compared to situation, dilemma describes an instance of heightened importance and focuses more on character. A hybrid tenet is then created – always play the dilemma, always heighten the dilemma, always drive the dilemma to the limit.

Keeping in fashion with the process of broad to narrow ideas, the next quotients of comedy given by Ball are all too practical. First, Ball says to “keep the 'set up' clean. The straight man should have a squarely solid residence in his physical position. Secondly the words and intent should be totally clear” (165). This not only is information for the actor, it is a clue as to how a director might stage a scene in which a straight man exists. By giving him a squarely solid residence, essentially making sure the character is in a stage composition, quite likely a focal point, and not in motion during the set up of a joke; the effect will be greater when the punch line to the joke is revealed. The punch line leads to the second part of the equation. On one end of the spectrum is the straight man, on the other the actor revealing the punch line, or as Ball coins it, the “tagline” (165). Again in reference to blocking, Ball guides actors in saying “don't move on the tag. A very skilled comic will even decline to deliver the tag line if someone is in motion, or if the set-up was muffled, or if there is some imbalance on stage” (165). Depending on the actor's various levels of comic prowess, the director can help the humor along by making sure that every member of the ensemble who is taking part in the straight man – tagline relationship understands how to physically respect the joke.
Stage composition should serve to create different focal points, moods, and help the dramatic action of a piece move forward; these notions are transcendental to most directing processes. The final subject Ball touches on is that of the rule of three, something already established as prevalent in the works of Simon. Ball explains this method: “Gags come in threes. The learning process is the subliminal structure for a great deal of comic material”, many opportunities can be found in Rumors itself, Ball concludes “many jokes are structured on an idea, the reinforcement of the idea, and then the payoff” (167). It is part of the director's work to make this structure known to the actors, early in the rehearsal process, so that they might incorporate and identify the function of repetition and use of their physical instrument for greatest comic effect without sacrificing the forward momentum of the dilemma.

Two primary subjects were the focus of this chapter. The first was the development, style, and notable works of Simon from which an image of Simon as a playwright has emerged. Stylistically, Simon writes plays that feature characters with which the audience can identify, time and again refuting the notion that he writes with themes in mind. These characters quite often have a basis in Simon's personal experience and a strain of autobiography can be found in several of his works. In his comedies, the characters are faced with a dilemma through which they must fight and the dilemma is the basis for any humor that emerges.

The second subject was an exploration into the direction of comedy. By utilizing great directors of the past this essay has established the need for a unitary vision used by the director to facilitate communion with the audience. Specifically the notion of utilizing
predominant elements in the direction of *Rumors* was highlighted. In order of importance plot, spectacle, and language are the elements which best serve the piece and should be taken into highest consideration in directing the piece. Finally, the direction of humor is a skill to develop and stage composition for comic effect was described as well as the correct time to play for laughs without compromising any forward momentum.
CHAPTER II

ANALYZING FOR PERFORMANCE

The first and possibly most important tool a director has in text analysis is establishing the spine of the play. The spine of the play is an idea popularized by Harold Klurman and Elia Kazan. Kazan's loose definition for the spine the play can be found in his book, *Kazan on Directing*, in which he writes “(the director’s) first job is find a 'center' or 'core' for the work of the production. The more integrated this center is, the more integrated will be the production” concluding that “Once it is established, the base decision has been made. All else devolves from this” (7). Kazan goes on to provide examples of spines including “the loneliness of American life” for *Casey Jones*, “search for happiness among petty objects” for *Awake and Sing!*, and “fight for achievement” for *Golden Boy* (8-9).

To find the spine for *Rumors* requires integrating the needs of all of its characters; therefore, the spine of *Rumors* is a super-objective that is shared by all of the characters. It is that of preserving image for everyone in the play in a variety of ways. This work argues that the focus of this plot driven piece is manifested in the dilemma faced by the dinner guests: how to escape this fiasco with as little damage to their image as possible. A more concise spine is “fight for self-preservation.”

With the spine of the play found, the next addend of text analysis is that of identifying given circumstances or expositional material. David Ball, author of
Backwards & Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays, describes given circumstances in the introduction to chapter eight of his book “Exposition.” For Ball given circumstances pertains to

“information (which) usually begins with the nature of the play's world in its initial stasis. Where are we? What is it like? What is the situation? What are the time and period? Then we need information about the people and their basic relationships. Who are all these people? What have they to do with each other? And what are they doing here?” (39).

Essentially, these given circumstances can be found through answering a series of questions about a script.

The nature of farcical comedy requires even more reliance on given circumstances than in standard textual analysis. In chapter one, it was discovered that an obstacle in producing Rumors is the establishment of a sense of jeopardy. The given circumstances of Rumors are the key to heightening the dilemma and overcoming any possible lack of jeopardy for the characters. The circumstances responded to will include those environmental, geographical, period related, economic, political, and will also cover circumstances pertaining to the previous action to Rumors.

The environment of Rumors is an upper-class house; specifically, it is the home of Charlie and Myra Brock. Charlie is the deputy mayor of New York City. A dinner party is being hosted by the couple to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. According to the stage directions, the house is “a large, tastefully renovated, Victorian house in Sneden's Landing, New York” and “the interior is white, modern, monochromatic, and sparkling
clean. A nice combination” (Simon 3). It is important to note that the phrase “tastefully renovated” is subject to the tastes of the period, which will be later discussed. This is the environment of a couple who require of their home the sense of “sparkling cleanliness,” a feat that is accomplished by their cleaning staff, as it is later revealed they have both a butler and a cook. Practically, Simon suggests the setting have at least two levels, a main floor and an upstairs landing that leads to the host’s rooms. Do to the utilization of the many doors on stage throughout the duration of the play, this essay moves to offer Simon's description of the original floor plan.

“An entrance doorway upstage right leads to an open vestibule. To the right of the door is a powder room. One step down is the large and comfortable living room. There are two furniture groupings in the living room. At stage right are a love seat and two chairs. Upstage of the love seat and near the powder room door is a table and a telephone with a long cord. At center stage are a large sofa and coffee table. Two chairs at stage left are part of a grouping with the sofa. On the stage left wall is a mirror in an ornate frame. Against the upstage wall are a well-stocked bar and a stereo system enclosed in a gorgeous cabinet. Between these two pieces is a closed door leading to the cellar.

From the living room, a curved staircase leads to a landing and two doors, each leading to a bedroom. On the landing is a railed banister. At the stage left end of the second-floor landing is an archway leading to a hallway and more bedrooms. Downstage of this archway is an extension of the balcony which can be used as a playing area.
Through the living room, at left, double doors lead into a dining room and then to the kitchen. A huge window above the front door looks out onto a wooded backyard. A large window in the stage right wall overlooks a yard and the driveway beyond. Headlights of approaching cars may be seen through this window” (3).

Though lengthy, Simon's stage directions set up a specific obstacle course, a maze through which the dinner guests must search to overcome their dilemma. Again, such qualifiers as “comfortable”, “ornate”, and “gorgeous” are subjective to whomever has decorated the house. It is the belief of this work that it is not necessarily the playwright who furnishes the house, but the characters. This is not to say that certain plot driven items such as doors, stairways, and windows should be changed as they are the linchpin of farce; however, the style of the physical environment is left to the characters and the design team.

Geographically, the play takes place in “Sneden's Landing, New York, about forty minutes from the city” (Simon 3). Simon does not go into more geographic detail; however, it is likely that this location may have certain characteristics beyond its proximity to New York City. According to a Jerry Cheslow article in The New York Times written within two years of the publication of Rumors, Sneden's Landing is also known as “Palisades” (Cheslow). Palisades is described by Cheslow as “a three-square-mile heavily wooded hamlet just 12 miles north of the George Washington Bridge.” It's close proximity to the city and wooded seclusion has made it appealing to locals and celebrities alike. It has been the home to many celebrities including Al Pacino, Mikhail Baryshnikov,
William Hurt, Diane Keaton, Pinchas Zuckerman, and Bill Murray. In 1989, Murray paid $7 million for a mansion in Palisades. Cheslow alludes to the notion that these celebrities may be bringing unwanted attention to the quiet way of life that long-time residents have enjoyed. He cites resident Roger Pellegrini in saying “It had a dilapidated charm that is vanishing. The place is losing its humility, as the price of houses rises and the old mansions are fixed up.” Further supporting the argument of long-time resident discontent with new developmental projects is Cheslow's report that “Residents of the hamlet are known for the way in which they jealously guard against development that they consider out of character. In 1979, a three-acre plot on Closter Road went up for sale and, according to local rumors, an oil company tried to buy it for a service station. The residents raised $12,500 and obtained a state grant of $37,500 to buy the site and donate it to Orangetown. The site, known as 'the triangle,' remains wooded.”

Given the information about residents of the town, its location, and housing trends, it is unlikely that Charlie and Myra have lived in Sneden's Landing or “Palisades” all of their lives. Simon's stage directions that the house be “tastefully renovated” suggest that it was an older mansion, likely recently bought by the couple for the rising popularity of its location.

*Rumors* was first produced in 1988 and was set in the present of that time. Apart from a few topical references within the action of the play including *The Phantom of The Opera*, Meryl Streep, and home telephones, there is little to create a specific period to the piece. Given the nature of some of the physical humor with the corded telephone *Rumors*
works best when set around the late 1980s to early 1990s. Simon is specific about time of day and time of year; however, stating “it is 8:30 P.M. On a pleasant evening in May” (3). Setting the play in May of 1990 affords a production the opportunity to be specific about research yet to be presented on economic and political environments; therefore, this production of *Rumors* will be set in 1990.

The economic environment of the late 1980s was closely tied with the political environment. George Bush Sr. won the presidency on a republican platform that was largely similar to the administration of Reagan. In *Time Magazine's* “List of Unfortunate One-Liners” one can find perhaps the most famous quote from Bush during the time: “Read my lips: no new taxes.” He said this during his acceptance speech for the republican presidential nomination in 1988. Bush ended up winning the election and became the 41st U.S. President. Chief among Bush's concerns were maintaining the tax cuts created by the Reagan administration. Of the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations, President Bill Clinton has said:

“Under Reagan and Bush, we had built a large structural deficit that persisted in good times and bad. When President Reagan took office, the national debt was $1 trillion. It tripled during his eight years, thanks to the big tax cuts in 1981 and increases in spending. Under President Bush, the debt continued to increase again, by one-third, in just four years. Now it totaled $4 trillion.”

Clinton goes on to attribute the deficit to the economic policy of Reagan and Bush that focused on “supply-side” economics. Clinton alludes to the notion that supply-side economics is the theory that the more taxes are cut, the more the economy will grow, with
the growth producing more tax revenue at lower tax rates than previously had been
Print). According to the *Time* article, “As presidents sometimes must, Bush raised taxes.
His words were used against him by then-Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton in a
devastating attack ad during the 1992 presidential campaign” ("Lists." *TIME.com.* N.p.,

The characters in *Rumors* are likely to be currently benefitting from the tax cuts of
Reagan *before* the tax hikes of Bush Sr. were implemented. Also, Charlie and Myra are
economically well off given the neighborhood in which they live. According to the earlier
cited *New York Times* article the economic information for the Palisades was as follows:
“Median household income: $90,000 (1990 estimate). Median price of one-family house:
$550,000.” These numbers as compared to the national averages of $46,637 for median
household income and $97,300 for median price of a one-family house indicate a large
disparity between Charlie and Myra and the average American of that time (*census.gov*).

Unfortunately Charlie and Myra never appear in the action of *Rumors*, but one can
infer that their friends are of similar economic situations. Most of them have jobs
associated with high pay and Lenny has a brand new BMW. Ken is a lawyer, Lenny an
accountant, Ernie a psychiatrist, and Glenn a politician. Of the women in the show only
two of them, Cookie and Chris, are specifically noted as having jobs. Cookie is the host
of a cooking television show and Chris is a lawyer. This suggests that most of the couples
in *Rumors* survive off of single and likely large incomes. Also, it is revealed that Myra is
“a wealthy woman” and that she is the one who bought the house in which the events of
*Rumors* unfold (Simon 34-35).

When considering previous action it is prudent to utilize the entire script. From the script one may use exposition to create an image of what happened leading up to the dramatic action in the play. A first instinct might be to focus on the beginning of the play; however, as a director one should note previous action has an effect on any dramatic event in the play. This portion of “Analyzing for Performance” will be an exploration first of any exposition found within the text, followed by a devised synopsis of the previous action based on aforementioned exposition. Chris and Ken are at a dinner party for Charlie and Myra Brock's tenth wedding anniversary (Simon 11). No one else is at the house yet including the cook and butler, Mai Li the cook has been gone for a week to take care of her mother (Simon 15). The most immediate dilemma Ken and Chris face in the first scene of *Rumors* is the bullet wound their host, Charlie Brock, has suffered. It is referred to in the fifth line of dialogue upon Ken saying “He's bleeding like crazy” (Simon 4). Ken and Chris have been at the house for ten minutes, having heard Charlie shoot himself upon arriving (Simon 6). Myra, the guests' other host is also missing (Simon 9). Chris has quit smoking before reaching the party and has not had a cigarette for 18 months, though the stress of the dilemma is fast tempting her to reconsider (Simon 13).

Claire and Lenny's arrival provides the exposition that they were in a car accident before the play and have both sustained injuries (Simon 12-13). The couple has just purchased a brand new BMW, never “touched by human hands” that they were driving in the accident (Simon 14). It is also revealed that Claire and Chris have attended fund
raising dinners for various illnesses in the past (Simon 18). At this point the first nod toward the plays title is made. Claire and Lenny believe Myra and Charlie to be cheating on each other and that Claire and Lenny have nearly gotten a divorce in the past (Simon 24-25). While discussing the Brock dilemma Ken describes Chris and his arrival in the following exchange:

Ken: Chris and I were driving up when we heard the shot. The front door was locked. I ran around the back and broke in the kitchen window …

Lenny: So you broke in and rushed upstairs. Was he on the floor?

Ken: No. He was sitting in bed. The television was on. One of those Evangelist shows. A bottle of Valium was on the night table. He was half-conscious. I figured maybe he took a couple of pills to make himself drowsy, put the gun to his head, started to fall asleep, and shot himself through the ear (Simon 31).

This exchange paints a specific image of the events immediately preceding the action of *Rumors*.

The next couple to arrive, Cookie and Ernie, also reveal information about their actions prior to the action of the play when Cookie describes a sore back which she injured while getting dressed for the party (Simon 39). The final couple, Glenn and Cassie, make clear their marital strife in their first scene onstage and Cassie suggests that Glenn has been cheating on her for a year (Simon 65). Late in the play we learn more of Myra's past and it is made known that Myra's mother died six years prior to the events in *Rumors* (Simon 100). Upon the entrance of the police officers more information about
Lenny and Claire's car accident is discovered. The car accident is riddled with Myra and Charlie's mysterious story, Officer Welch elucidates the accident in his speech:

“At approximately eight-fifteen tonight, and auto accident occurred on twelfth and Danbury. A brand-new red 1990 Porsche convertible with New York license plates smashed into the side of a brand-new BMW four-door sedan. Now, we know it wasn't the BMW's fault because the Porsche was a stolen car. Stolen at eight-fifteen tonight right off the dealer's lot. The man and the Porsche got away”
(Simon 117).

Following the passage, Welch goes on to say that the Porsche was bought as a gift by Charles Brock for Myra earlier that day and the previous action begins to intertwine (Simon 118). No further information is revealed about any action prior to the piece. Now that the research has been provided to support such a venture, a backstory for *Rumors* can be posited. In 1980, Charlie and Myra Brock were married. Four years into their marriage, Myra's mother died. During this period of time Chris Gorman was an avid smoker until she decided to quit smoking in 1987. Around 1988, Glenn, Charlie, Myra, and Carol Newman begin alleged affairs, though who was actually unfaithful is unclear.

In 1990, the week before the Brock's anniversary, their cook Mai Li had to travel to Japan to visit her ailing mother. Without a cook, the Brocks plan dinner on their own. On the day of the dinner party, Charlie went into a car dealer and bought Myra a brand new Porsche to celebrate. Myra remained at home. As the day drew on the hosts of the party laid out all of the ingredients to make dinner and made sure that their house was immaculate for their dinner guests. At this point the Brock family ceases to have an exact
storyline. The Gormans, Ken and Chris, arrive at the party around eight in the evening and Ken hears a gunshot upon getting out of his car. Ken rushes into the house and into Charlie's room to find him knocked out from Valium with an apparently self-inflicted bullet wound in his ear. While all of this is happening, Lenny and Claire Ganz are en-route to the party and get into a car accident around eight-fifteen in the evening, in which they are hit by Myra's stolen Porsche. Both sustain whiplash with Lenny suffering from a stiff neck and Claire a swollen lip. At this point the dramatic action of *Rumors* begins.

With all of the circumstances leading up to and concerning the events in *Rumors* evaluated, the next step is to provide an in-depth textual analysis of the play and its characters. For a director to create a cohesive image of a play, they must understand how the play functions. This will be done by answering the following questions: what is the form or genre of the play, what is its style, what is the dramatic structure, what are the major and minor conflicts, what are the major and minor themes, and what symbols, images, and motifs might be found in the text. The form or genre of *Rumors* is comedy and its style, farce, is provided by its full title *Rumors: A Farce*. The first chapter of this work The dramatic structure can be thought of in two ways. First, in the Aristotelian fashion which notes if a play takes place within the course of a day or if its episodic. Second, by identifying each important dramatic event from the beginning to end of the piece. In accordance with Aristotelian unity of plot, the events of *Rumors* take place throughout the course of one night, in one location, and are logical results of one-another. It is not at all episodic.

The next factors to consider in textual analysis are the major and minor conflicts.
Before identifying conflict in *Rumors* one must define the term. In his book, *Backwards and Forwards*, David Ball describes the dangers of imprecise definitions for conflict. Ball writes “What is conflict? The word is used so much that we rarely scrutinize it for meaning. That leads to sloppy analysis” Ball goes on to suggest that a play’s conflict “is between what someone wants and what hinders the want: the obstacle” (27-28). Like all plays, a successful production of *Rumors* hinges on the active pursuit of tangible objectives. This pursuit is “the battle of wants” that Ball describes. The interest a play provides an audience is based on colliding objectives. Ball concludes his discussion of conflict with a useful list of four different forms of conflict one might find in a play. They will serve as the basis for conflict identification in *Rumors*.

The first is form of dramatic conflict Ball coins is “Me against myself” (Ball 30). This form of conflict is characterized by a character struggling with an internal obstacle. For each form of conflict Ball provides an anecdote in example. For the individual versus self, Ball explains: “I want your stamp collection, but I know that stealing is wrong and I have difficulty bringing myself to do it” (30). The second form of conflict Ball describes is “Me against other individuals” (31). Once again drawing upon the stamp anecdote, Ball explains “I want your stamps, but you guard them with a baseball bat. This conflict is between me and you: me against another individual” (31). The third form is “Me against Society” and its stamp explanation is “I stole your stamps. Now I am wanted by the F.B.I., hunted like a dog. I broke the law; now society's wrath hounds me. My adversary is not you; I am fighting for my freedom, and I am fighting against society” (Ball 31). The final conflict Ball categorizes as “Me against fate, or the universe, or
natural forces, or God or the gods” (Ball 31). For this last conflict possibility, Ball abandons his stamp explanation, writing “This is a hard battle to win! It is man against the sheer cliff of a mountain, or Lear howling 'Blow winds' at the storm, or Macbeth refusing to accept his fate, crying 'Lay on, Macduff!'” concluding “It is not a conflict likely to result from my stealing your stamps” (Ball 31).

Taking into consideration Ball's definitions for various dramatic conflicts, this work will now identify the major and minor conflicts that fuel *Rumors*. Major conflicts are ones that concern the protagonist and antagonist for the entirety of the play, while minor conflicts might concern individual characters in particular scenes. This work argues that the protagonist of *Rumors* is not a single character, but all of the dinner guests as a unit. Defining the protagonist of a play as the character or characters who change the most throughout the course of the play supports the argument that the guests function as a single protagonist. Their super-objective is to solve their collective dilemma in order to protect themselves. They share slight variations on the same super-objective and no one stands out from the group as changing more than any others.

Accepting the guests as a group protagonist leaves two options for antagonist: the guests in a “Me against other individuals” conflict or natural forces in a “Me against fate, or the universe, or natural forces, or God or the gods” conflict. Either conflict could be supported by the text of *Rumors*; however the most playable choice is to say the guests serve as their own antagonist in a “Me against other individuals” form of conflict. In order to convey this idea more clearly one might categorize the dinner guests as those aware of the dilemma and those unaware of the dilemma. The protagonists are those who
know of Charlie and Myra's situation while their primary obstacle is provided by those characters who are unaware of the dilemma. Of course, this status is constantly in flux, but a pattern can be established of old guests being antagonized by new guests. Every time a couple arrives the last couple is made aware of the dilemma and in essence become part of the greater dinner guest protagonist. By the end of the play all of the guests have reached protagonist status fighting against the antagonistic Officer Welch.

A plethora of minor conflicts exist in *Rumors*, the next section will lay them out chronologically, identifying the two characters involving the conflict and their opposing objectives. In the first scene a minor conflict is created that remains throughout the play is Ken and Chris's battle of trust. This minor conflict first manifests itself in the form of Chris's smoking habits. Chris is so stressed by the dilemma that she wants to smoke, while Ken wants her to “stay on the wagon.” The trust issue pervades Chris's telephone conversation and many interchanges between the two. A minor conflict exists between Lenny and whomever ran into his car, the physical remnants of which can be seen every time Lenny grimaces. A clear conflict and nod to the plays title and theme emerges during Lenny and Claire's discussion of rumors. Lenny believes that Myra has cheated on Charley while Claire believes that Charley has cheated on Myra. The two refuse to acknowledge each-others view point in this battle of reputation. A minor conflict also develops between Lenny and Ken over what course of action to take. Ken's objective is to keep everything a secret with Lenny offering the opposing view of calling the police. This conflict can be condensed down to the battle for leadership. A minor conflict exists between Lenny and Claire as a couple and Cookie and Ernie as a couple. Lenny and
Claire want to focus on their own tastes and are critical of Cookie and Ernie who feel attacked by the Ganzes. Cookie is struggling with a unique internal conflict. She wants to be helpful towards the cause of the party, but her body is physically preventing this because of her debilitating back spasms. The next minor conflict which appears is manifested between Glenn and Cassie Cooper. Glenn wants to maintain a certain image. Cassie, alternatively, wishes to expose the affair which she believes Glenn to be having. Neither wants to be embarrassed in front of their friends, but have provided embarrassing obstacles for one another. While these minor conflicts persist into the second act, by this period in the play the dinner guests have assumed their place as group protagonist and the only new conflict introduced is between the dinner guests as a unit and the police officers.

The major theme in Rumors might be posited in an if-then statement. If you are a good enough liar, then you can get out of anything. In every case the truth is never actually made clear. All of the alleged infidelity is never proven throughout the course of the play, the truth about Charley and Myra is never found out, and the guests are saved by one massive fabrication on the part of Lenny. Minor themes in Rumors include two prominent notions. The first minor theme is connected to some of the minor conflicts; if you trust your spouse, then you will never be alone. This theme is supported in conflicts involving the Gormans, the Ganzes, and the Coopers. The second minor theme can be articulated in the following statement: if you are a rumor monger, rumors will be started about you. Lenny and Claire are the first to facilitate the spread of rumors. They have also had rumors spread about them in the past. This serves misinformation as a recurring
idea in the play. The final facet of analysis for the piece as a whole is the discovery of symbols. For the purposes of this analysis a symbol will defined as something physically seen on stage that represents an idea. The first symbol seen in *Rumors* can be found before any words are spoken. Chris Gorman's need to smoke the cigarettes make the cigarettes symbolic of an unattainable sense of calm. Alcohol is also frequently consumed in times of heightened stress. In this way cigarettes and alcohol become symbolic of unattainable peace. A symbol adding stress to the characters of *Rumors* is the telephone. Every time the phone and intercom rings, more bad news is presented to the characters, heightening the circumstances of their dilemma. For this reason the phone becomes symbolic of the unexpected. While the phone is a symbol of the unexpected, the room to Charley's door is the most consistent symbol in the piece, constantly conveying the notion of an offstage “other.” Though the audience never actually sees Charley, butz his personal dilemma of shooting himself fuels the action of the entire play.

Now that the script has been analyzed on the scope of the entire piece, this work will engage in an analysis of each individual character. This character analysis is essential to creating a well-rounded image of the play. The analysis should be used as a starting point to validate any questions the director might ask of the actors and act as a guide for any questions the actors might have of the director. The characters will be considered in order of their appearance on the dramatis personae, starting with Chris and moving through Ken, Claire, Lenny, Ernie, Cookie, Glenn, Cassie, Officer Welch, and finally Officer Pudney. Each analysis will consider six subjects; super-objective, physical attributes, social behavior, emotional/psychological behavior, morality, and change of
character. Any super-objective suggested has been informed by Caldarone and Lloyd-Williams book, *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus*, which provides a plethora of synonymous words of playable objectives.

Chris Gorman's super-objective is to escape in order to alleviate the tension of her dilemma. This is done in a variety of ways including drinking, smoking, and physically attempting to leave strenuous situations. Physically, Chris is “an attractive woman in her mid-thirties … elegantly dressed in a designer evening gown” (Simon 3). In the spectrum of social behavior found in *Rumors* she is relatively easy going. She does not necessarily belittle or fight with anyone apart from her husband Ken, and it is not a recurring event. An important element in the development of Chris is her emotional and psychological behavior. Having not had a cigarette in over a year is a factor which constantly plagues Chris in this high-stress situation. Ken tries to distract her with alcohol, both of which are mood altering drugs that serve Chris's super-objective objective of escape. Chris believes herself to be a moral character, at no point does she question or suggest herself to good or bad, but is constantly driven by her need to escape. Chris's character undergoes little actual change throughout the course of *Rumors* beyond an increasingly intoxicated state due to drinking instead of smoking. Ultimately, the play ends with the Chris having escaped her strain with the key source of her strain, Charley, revived.

The second character to be approached Chris's husband, Ken Gorman. The super-objective of Ken is to guide the group through their dilemma in order to prove his worth. This is illustrated early in the play when Ken insists on Chris following his orders while on the phone with the doctor. Ken is also challenged by Lenny over leadership of the
group, and eventually Lenny is the one who saves them. Ken's super-objective includes not only the guidance of the dinner guests, but the Brocks as well. This is why he calls the doctor first and not the police upon finding Charley incapacitated. Simon describes the physical attributes of Ken in the following way: “about forty, dressed smartly in a tuxedo but looking flushed and excited” (4). Ken's social behavior is a result of his profession. As a lawyer, Ken is required to consider all possibilities. This fuels his initial decision to call the doctor over the police, his final treatment of the police officers in which he demands that they give a reason for coming to the house, and offers much humor when he mis-considers possibilities due to his hearing loss. Emotionally, Ken is rather level-headed in comparison to other dinner guests and ironically does not find much frustration from his hearing loss. The morality of Ken is in question because he is the first to heighten the dilemma of Charley and Myra by hiding its existence. This suggests that he is more interested in doing what is most beneficial rather than what is lawful. The notion is also alluded to that Ken may have been “cooking the books” with Charley (Simon, Neil. Rumors: A Farce. New York: Random House, 1990. Print). Ken's changes in Rumors are primarily physical, he goes through being able to hear and give commands to being deafened by a gun blast, and back to issuing orders again. By the end of the piece Lenny has asserted himself in the saving position of the dinner guests, upsetting Ken's ambitions.

Claire's super-objective is to amuse herself at the cost of others in order to be entertained. She is the first to mention rumors, and though she does not laugh at the possible infidelity between Myra and Charley, she is none-the-less insistent on both
hearing and sharing rumors. She also does comparatively little by way of overcoming the
dilemma of the dinner guests, but rather seems to enjoy all of the excitement. Given that
Claire and Lenny have just been in car-accident, Claire is physically somewhat
disheveled and sports a swollen lip. Of her appearance Simon writes “she's an attractive
woman in an evening gown. She is holding a handkerchief to the side of her mouth [and]
a purse in her other hand” (12). Claire's social behavior is somewhat untrustworthy given
her proclivity to the spreading of rumors. Her emotions are rarely seen as an identifying
factor for her as a character and an argument can be made that she is more of an observer
than a doer. Morally, Claire believes she is in the right to discuss rumors because it might
mean protecting those cares about, in the case of Charley and Myra, Myra. Claire does
not experience a change of character.

The next character to be discussed is Lenny. Lenny's super-objective is to
begrudgingly barrel through obstacles in order to survive. Through the car-accident,
revelation of the dilemma, and longwinded fabrication of an alibi, Lenny facilitates his
own survival. Simon offers little by way a physical description for Lenny's appearance,
writing that Lenny is “wearing a tuxedo and is holding the back of his neck with one
hand” (13). This neck injury is a recurring problem for Lenny and the actor who plays
Lenny must consider how he would move to favor such a tender area. Lenny's social
behavior includes talking over others, frequent use of sarcasm, and a reluctant reliance of
rumors. Emotionally, Lenny maintains a fairly consistent level of general annoyance. He
is annoyed by discussing rumors, he is annoyed by Ken's decision not to call the police,
and he is annoyed by his need to impersonate Charley. Morally, Lenny is unopposed to
lying, but is weakly opposed to discussing people behind their backs. Lenny does experience a change in *Rumors*. At the top of the show he believes that Ken should have called the police, but by the plays climactic monologue, Lenny is lying to police to get rid of them. His essential change is from that of self-preservation to group-preservation.

Ernie is Charley's therapist and husband to Cookie. His super-objective is to accommodate in order to keep the peace. He helps out with cooking the dinner, is predominantly soft-spoken and friendly, and is does not try to upset any balances. Ernie is described as “in his early fifties and is wearing a tuxedo” (Simon 38). Socially, Ernie is accommodating, but he does rise to the occasion when he feels he is unfairly criticized. Emotionally, Ernie is slightly explosive. He is quiet and well-mannered until he believes that Lenny is cheated in the game to decide who must pretend to Charley. Ernie is also prone to having comical expletives make appearances. Ernie believes himself to be a moral character and insists on replacing Lenny and Claire's gift to Myra and Charley, which Cookie has inadvertently broken. Ernie's change in character is highlighted in the earlier cited game. Ernie is normally a calm, collected, accommodating individual, but by at the height of the dilemma he changes into someone capable of yelling “No, no. It was one. ONE FINGER. ONE! I SAW IT!!” (Simon 111).

Cookie's super-objective is the same as Ernie's and the two often work in tandem to accommodate. Physically, Cookie has the most absurd appearance of the characters in *Rumors* and sports “a god-awful evening gown” (Simon 38) which she later defends as Russian. She carries a cushion with her because of a constant battle with back spasms. No indication is given by Simon that the spasms affect her appearance when they are not in
effect. Cookie has pleasant, somewhat artificial and calculated social responses, probably developed from her time spent as the host of a television cooking program. Emotionally and psychologically, Cookie is again similar to Ernie, but does not have as many moments of explosion, rather she is genuinely accommodating. Cookie has little reason to believe that she is not a character of moral quality and both she and Ernie find themselves in the sticky dilemma of *Rumors* unfairly. Cookie undergoes no great change from the beginning of the play's dramatic action to the end.

The final couple to be discussed is the Cooper, Glenn and Cassie. Glenn's super-objective is to keep control over Cassie in order to maintain appearances. He is running for state senate and anything that Cassie has to say about his alleged infidelity could severely damage his reputation, as could the events unfolding at the Brock's tenth anniversary party. Cassie's super-objective is to get the truth from Glenn in order to be vindicated in her actions. She nags at Glenn in an attempt to get him confess and when he refuses to confess she exhibits a variety of tactics to get him do to so including rubbing her quartz crystal and flirting with Lenny. The Coopers are the most physically attractive characters in the play. Of their appearance Simon simply says “a handsome couple … in evening clothes. GLENN holds a gift from Ralph Lauren's” (60). Compared to the rest of the character descriptions, this is high physical praise. Glenn and Cassie both engage in some awkward social behaviors. Glenn is suggested by more than character to be having an extra-marital affair and Cassie is over-reliant on rubbing an ancient crystal in order to calm her nerves. Emotionally, Glenn is very detached, he reveals very little when weedled by Cassie, who in opposition has a wide emotional range. Glenn never really
supports himself as a moral character and by virtue of other characters treatment of him an argument can be made that is of low moral fiber. Cassie has strong morals, in her opinion; however if she was ruled by morals alone she would have already abandoned Glenn.

The two minor characters, Officer Welch and Officer Pudney, serve a major purpose in *Rumors*. They are the final obstacle to the unified dinner guests. Officer Welch's super-objective is to interrogate the dinner guests in order to investigate a combination hit-and-run auto theft. Officer Pudney's super-objective is slightly different than Welch, though she serves a similar function. As a “green” cop, Pudney's super-objective is to perform exactly as she should in order to prove herself. The physical appearance of these two is offered by Simon's directions upon their entrance:

“We hear loud banging on the front door, and then it opens. Two police officers stand there. One, Officer Welch, is a strong, vigorous man. The other, Officer Pudney, is a woman in her late twenties” (112).

The officers offer little in way of social behavior beyond performing their duties with a slight variations from Welch who accepts Lenny's story simple because “he likes it.” Pudney does not change in *Rumors*; however, Welch does change when he abandons his duty in order to go home and see his family.

The final portion of “Analyzing for Performance” will be on the specifics of UND Theatre Art Department's 2013 production of *Rumors*. The goals of this portion are threefold; first, anticipated problems will be discussed; second, technical elements; and third, a specific directorial approach to the production will be offered. A few anticipated
problems, in this production to be thought of as opportunities, have been earlier discussed in the first chapter of this text.

The “sense of jeopardy” will be a constant struggle in this production for multiple reasons. The characters are not particularly identifiable. They are wealthy Manhattanites attending a dinner party at a trendy resort-like neighborhood. A possibility exists of an audience resenting these people and wish them to get caught. The opportunity here is to create a piece which the audience might care about. Therefore, the approach argued for by this work is to exaggerate the wealthy and trendy aspects of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Now, in 2013, *Rumors* has become a period piece that offers a certain amount of humor in comparison to today's popular tastes. If the characters in *Rumors* can be thought of as silly or not knowing any better despite their riches, it might soften the fact that they are in the top fifteen percent of Americans and enhance a sense of jeopardy.

The second anticipated problem is the way the actors approach their roles. Given that *Rumors* is a farce, it requires a different acting style than, say, a contemporary American drama. The characters must be a little exaggerated, some of their movement must be choreographed, and Simon's sense of dilemma must be upheld. It is possible that some actors may try to approach their roles in the style of psychological realism, the predominant acting style in America today. To psychologically over-analyze the inner motives of the characters as individuals in this farce will lead to challenges with pacing, believability, and heightening of the dilemma. This is not to say that these things should be done, an actor is entitled to their homework, but a farcical style must be a clear goal.

The final anticipated problem is the pacing in the scene between Glenn and
Cassie. Compared to the rest of this piece, the initial Glenn and Cassie scene is lengthy, offering no entrances by other characters to offer new excitement. In many of Simon's other works there is time for characters to sit on a couch and discuss problems, but *Rumors* has to barrel forward forcing laughs the entire show. Sitting on a couch and discussing their problems is exactly what Glenn and Cassie do. Though the scene does a nice job of setting up Glenn and Cassie's backstory and plays once again on the notion of rumors, it can potentially dwarf the momentum of the piece.

Technical elements in *Rumors* will accomplish two goals. First the set will create obstacles for the dinner guests while offering a humorous depiction of an uptight and wealthy 1980s era house. Secondly, the costumes should foster the notion that the dinner guests begin as individuals and end as a unit. Above all, the funnier choice that is a cohesive possibility in the world of the play will always be chosen. Apart from the many doors required in the set design, no extravagant technical needs are found in *Rumors*. It requires a straight forward box set. The main challenge for the technical team may be finding enough trendy items from the 1980s to fill up the space. Lighting for *Rumors* will be straight forward: interior lighting.

This chapter will close in offering an approach for the direction of *Rumors* based on the research provided thus far. A director's job is always to consider the audience and that should be upheld in the direction of *Rumors*. Given that *Rumors* is a comedy, the director must represent the audience by constantly asking the question: “what is the funnier choice?” This question should be posed to the actors, the designers, and to the director in an attempt to avoid any missed opportunities for a laugh. The opportunities for
laughter in a Simon piece will arise out of the dilemma and so it must be the greatest and most often called upon tool the director uses in connecting with the acting ensemble and the audience. A director must also consider the craft of staging comedy and note how to explain to an actor the nature of any joke, how to heighten said joke, and how stage composition and movement will serve the humor the best. Finally, the fact that Neil Simon has written only one farce in his career supports an argument for a production responsibility to the style of the piece. *Rumors* should be directed as a farce.

In summation, “Analyzing for Performance” covered many facets of *Rumors* in analysis. These ranged from the many different environments which can be found in the world of *Rumors* to discovering the super-objective of every character in the play. A breakdown of the important dramatic events was provided and a textual analysis of the play as whole unveiled the dinner guests as both the protagonist and antagonist in a “me against other individuals” conflict. The variety of information offered throughout this chapter served as the basis for an approach to the direction of *Rumors*. 
CHAPTER III

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROCESS

Directing a fully mounted production was an undertaking that at times became overwhelming. Though one can believe themselves thoroughly prepared, there is no way to plan for the unexpected problems and wonderful moments of discovery that can occur while rehearsing a play. Moments of the process were overwhelming, both positive and negative, and always educational. In the final chapter of this work, challenges and triumphs will be discussed regarding the rehearsal process for Rumors. First, clarity of communication will be focused upon, expected issues and how they were resolved will follow, and finally unexpected issues and performance quality will be assessed along with a reaction to the strengths and weaknesses displayed by the director.

As the director, one must take full responsibility for the experience of the audience. With that notion in mind, it is incredibly difficult to not blame oneself if something does not go according to plan. The key to directing this production Rumors was not the humor, the staging, or the punch lines, but the communication. This portion of the response will be written chronologically, starting with the beginning of the rehearsal process and working towards the performances.

The initial readings of Rumors were met with much laughter from the cast and crew as the ensemble became acclimated to the writing. In the first few rehearsals, the goals of the production were communicated to the actors: we were to always play the
dilemma, never play at the comedy, and live truthfully under the heightened circumstances of a farcical world. With these tenets in mind, the cast had two read-throughs and the process jumped straight in to blocking. In hindsight, it would have been a stronger choice to develop a vocabulary of farcical terms earlier on in the rehearsal process to ease the realism and musical theatre actors into the world of *Rumors*. The blocking of the show was a concise process and the time management goal of having both blocked and run the entire show off book in the first two weeks was nearly accomplished. The second act, which is driven by a quick pace and features many people speaking in quick succession was not off book until after the University of North Dakota's spring break. While blocking was a confident and successful exercise the real challenge in communication was to manifest itself in the first working rehearsals back from spring break.

Working with many actors who had little to no experience with farcical comedy became a constant challenge to creatively and clearly communicate how the comedic style operates. The actors cast in this production of *Rumors* had been trained primarily in psychological realism and the Meisner technique. It was an unanticipated struggle to convey the over the top energy, exasperation, and timing when working with a farce. Eventually, a working vocabulary was created that most of the ensemble understood, but moments of frustration were available up until the final dress rehearsal. The term “energy” was often mistranslated to focus on screaming or speaking at rushing pace when it was intended to direct the conviction with which the actors were to either pursue their objectives or maintain the sense of jeopardy mentioned in Chapter 2. This
misunderstanding led to a change of tactics on part of the director. Rather than asking the actors to “be bigger,” the actors were asked to consider how important every entrance and exit was to both their character and the play. This tactic successfully smoothed out pacing issues and strengthened the objectives of the actors. A strength of communication was the openness with which the actors were able to approach the director. While they were struggling to live truthfully under heightened circumstances, an effort was made by individuals in the cast to question the director about how to better serve the play. These conversations, often happening at the end of the night after notes, led to discoveries that were usually incorporated in the following rehearsal. One on one communication was a strength of the process while at times an issue may have arisen from being too broad with the notes that were meant to establish the farcical world of Rumors. With only two weeks of working rehearsals and runs before opening the production, actors were eager to latch on to any active words that were thrown out as possible suggestions. At one point during a working rehearsal with the actors that were playing Glenn and Cassie, a mention was made of Glenn trying to belittle Cassie. Glenn and Cassie's first scene in act one continued to struggle until finally a conversation was had with three rehearsals left. In the conversation the message was given to the actors that too much venom was seeping into the scene and that while they were acting honestly, it did not serve the world of Rumors. Frustrated, the actor of Glenn immediately rehashed the analysis from working rehearsals stating that he was trying “to belittle” Cassie. An adjustment was suggested that Glenn attempt “to mock” Cassie in place of belittlement. This simple semiotic change propelled the scene forward in a way that fixed the pacing issues, tendency towards realism and
violence, and even helped the actors playing both Glenn and Cassie find more humor in the scene. Strength of communication, especially while suggesting active verbs to the actors could have been more productive if a list of verbs had been made prior to rehearsal beginning that promoted a sense of farce rather than a sense of realism: “to mock” over “to belittle.” While one may use adjectives such as big, physical, caricature, and over-the-top to describe a world for actors, in many instances the actors only wanted an active verb with which to work.

A second facet of the communicative process in *Rumors* was that between the design team and the director. From the first design meeting, an open line was established with scenic and lighting designer Brad Reissig, costume designer Michelle Davidson, sound designer Loren Leipold, and props designer Joseph Bussey. All designs were agreed upon fairly early in the process and at no point was the overall concept for the piece hindered by its design elements. The costumes marvelously suggested the glitz of the late 1980s and those who would have enough money to pay for any excess. The actors had little trouble living in the costumes, and the work was done in a timely fashion. The set was almost an exact replica of the vision of the director. The white walls, what Simon calls “monochromatic” set a stark backdrop on which the actors exploded with their bright costumes. The two elements worked well together by way of making every entrance and exit more dramatic. The visual stimuli of a bright color exploding onstage to a white background made the audience pay more attention, the actors feel the intensity of themselves onstage, and served the dilemma of *Rumors* quite nicely. In hindsight of viewing the production with an audience the sunken living room, while very functional
and an element resulting in many opportunities for dynamic staging, may have been a foot too low. Moments existed during which one could see the audience shifting to get a better look at what was happening in the lowered downstage area. These instances were minimal however, and the sunken living room helped immensely with stage pictures in the larger scenes at the end of Act I and throughout Act II. Blocking could have solved this problem if characters simply did not sit on the downstage level; however, that use was important in creating multi-plane pictures. The clearest change of blocking to reconcile the audiences experience with the design would have been to remove any moments of two characters sitting in the sunken living room at once during moments when those characters were the focal point for the audience. The sound design worked well and the production team was able to reach out to students and faculty not involved in the production to act as Charley and Myra in a recorded pre-show mixtape. Sound designer Loren Leipold had the idea that it could be fun if the audience heard the missing host and hostess trying to Emcee a mixtape for the party.

This work will now respond to the expected problems stated in Chapter 2 as well as how those problems were managed in the rehearsal process. The anticipated problems for this production of *Rumors* began with the struggle to believe in a sense of jeopardy. The notion was that audience members may not empathize with the plight of rich, rumor spreading characters. The decision was made to play into the wealth, rather than figure out how to hide it. The costume and set designs were centered upon the ridiculousness of the wealth as well as by placing the production in 1990, a time period with tastes that might be comical to the present day eye. The sense of jeopardy was never in question
from a technical standpoint, but the sense of jeopardy was difficult for the actors to grasp. A farcical sense of jeopardy should point more towards exasperation than frustration or anger. This idea became a mantra in many rehearsals and eventually stuck with the actors on their journey to create characters out of a relatively thin text. Another attempt was made to strengthen the sense of jeopardy by asking each actor couple how they feel about the other couples in the world of *Rumors* before they find out about Charley. From this question discoveries were made about each character and couple, not specifically stated by Simon in the text, but helpful in creating more dynamic and interesting couples. Also, given the new convention of the couple mostly disliking each other in part or in whole a sense of jeopardy was promoted in Act II as the all were forced by the dilemma to work together.

The second anticipated problem was the way in which the actors would approach their roles. The foresight of this issue was well founded and became the greatest challenge of directing *Rumors*. Farce in many ways errrs on the side of indication to the untrained eye. Many believe that caricature and stereotype offer the actor nowhere to go and actors avoid those words in their work. This was a problem. Some actors would go too far in the direction of farce until they were blatantly playing to the audience in a manner that every line was being played as a punch line along with unmotivated gestures. Others were stuck in an ultra-realistic style that did not lend itself to falling to the floor at the sound of a doorbell. Eventually this problem was solved by choreographing movements, explaining why the movements were funny in the situation, explaining how the actors may remain honest in that heightened situation, and through the help of veteran
actors Joseph Bussey and Emily Wirkus. Bussey is a physical actor with a strength for farce and character roles. Bussey constantly challenged himself to discover more and more farcical elements to his character starting very early in the process. Wirkus was quick to pick up on the style as well, creating a frantic Chris that displayed a range of comedic movement. Without these two actors for leadership, it would have been very difficult to communicate the style without physically showing the actors. For an actor, a physical reading can be sometimes as frustrating as a line reading, so this provided a directorial relief.

The final anticipated problem was the pacing in the scene between Glenn and Cassie, the same scene discussed earlier in this chapter. The scene is awkwardly placed in the script, just as the door-slamming elements of the piece are coming together, Glenn and Cassie enter for a battle that features no one else on stage and few one-liners to bolster it up. As anticipated, the scene struggled in a number of ways. First, the casting featured two actors with little to no farcical training. This was a choice that every director probably faces and must decide upon. Both actors were talented and fit the descriptions of the characters as well as did a nice job auditioning for the role. Any issue was the director's problem to work with. A second problem had little to do with the scene, but its place in the script. The scene had to be able to move along at a fast pace, regardless of if that fast pacing hindered the actors. In addition to the earlier anecdote about the actor playing Glenn and active verbs, a metaphor was used to better help the actors understand the scene. The scene was described as a boxing match, with its analytical units broken down into rounds. If Cassie scored a point, Glenn was physically blocked to escape her
and vice versa. To make the message more clear for the actors, they were asked to do a push and pull exercise to get them to physically access their psychological objectives. While the scene still required more work, these techniques greatly improved the scenes believability, farcical style, and function within the play as a whole.

Unanticipated problems are next to be discussed and were always unwelcome, but forced the ensemble to grow and add a certain resilience to the production and hopefully the director and actors moving forward. Three unanticipated challenges arose during the course of the rehearsal process. The first challenge was Lenny and Claire's first scene together, the second challenge was spring break and inclement weather, and the final challenge was with consistency. Early in the first act, Lenny and Claire have a scene during which they discuss rumors and their effect on the lives of Lenny and Claire. Initially, no problem was expected with this scene; it had plenty of one-liners, some comic physical bits written into the scene, and it did not seem overly lengthy while reading or blocking the scene. In rehearsal, the scene became an ache for the actors playing Lenny and Claire as they struggled to define their function as actors in the scene and the scene's function in the play. The great sense of jeopardy is nowhere to be found in the scene because Lenny and Claire are unaware at this point of Charley's attempted suicide. Dilemma would be no help in the scene, the two were simply setting up a stream of running-gags for later in the action of the play. The actor playing Claire became frustrated after one rehearsal and a conversation was had about what Claire really wants in the scene. The decision was made that Claire was attempting to needle Lenny with all of the talk of rumors and that the discussion of rumors might be a hypocritical past time
the couple bonds over. The actor playing Lenny was asked to make eye contact more often with Claire throughout the scene in an attempt to heighten his reactions to her while requiring more honesty. This discussion alleviated much of the tension for the actors and heightened the tension for characters, but the scene was still inconsistent. Finally, the realization was arrived upon that where the characters were right before their entrance was being overlooked. The two had just gotten into a car crash yet they almost seemed relaxed in rehearsal of the scene. Once this was brought to the attention of the actors, they immediately made larger physical choices and added an attitude with one-another that established their relationship in a much more effective manner. From that point forward the scene was only missing the laughter of an audience.

The next unexpected issue was primarily a scheduling one. While the rehearsal schedule was made long before rehearsals began, the arrival of spring break became an enormous obstacle. As desired, the entire production was on schedule throughout the entire process, but a paper schedule does not in any way convey the true message of trying to coach a freshly off-book cast in a single week of rehearsal. The week back from spring break featured long rehearsals, great developments by the actors, and general exhaustion for the director. It was difficult to gauge whether or not it would have been a stronger decision to have even longer blocking rehearsals before spring break to attempt to get into working rehearsals sooner, but the cast seemed very fatigued the way that things were managed. A better solution may have been to approach the cast with the physical requirements of the production earlier on so that they may have been in a healthier state in the first two weeks of rehearsal. These scheduling questions aside, the
most unfortunate scheduling moment in Rumors rehearsal was not the fault of anyone involved with it. An April snowstorm pushed back the first full run off-book a day and cancelled two whole days of school so that actors were not able to gather in any way for three days with the opening of the material only a week away. The snowstorm truly stifled momentum, occurring on Monday and Tuesday, the production did not really regain its momentum until Friday. Those two days would have been very helpful in creating a more consistent product, which is the final unanticipated problem.

The inconsistency of directing educational theatre is something that one can not accurately fathom without attempting to do it. One is met with veteran actors and young actors alike, those who are eager to work and those who have natural talent but lack motivation, and most importantly the challenge of getting that group of individuals to work together towards a common goal. The primary issue with inconsistency was found in during the last week of rehearsals. Beginning with the snow storm, the remaining week of rehearsal would alternate between slow pacing with a lack of energy in pursuing objectives and speaking so quickly that it was incapable of being understood at times. This is inherent in any piece featuring so many characters exchanging ideas in short amount of time, but the memorization never seemed to be an issue. The real problem came with inconsistent character choices. Regardless of being directed to solidify a certain positive choice in rehearsal, things were left out, changed, or completely disregarded. This led to a certain amount of frustration on the part of the director. This inconsistency really led up to the opening night of the production and it is the argument of this work that a more consistent world could have been created sooner if there had not
be a snow storm and if the director was clearer in communicating the style earlier in the rehearsal process. This is not to say that the production was not ready to open, it certainly was; however one takes a leap of faith when they have to wait for an audience to even out the performance. As with everything about directing this production of *Rumors*, the inconsistencies were a learning experience. It was revealed that the addition of costumes, even if the production is devoid of quick-changes, can put actors into a less consistent state of mind. It was revealed that the addition of hair and makeup can do the same thing. Finally it was revealed that a director must simply detach in order to enjoy the experience of the finished product, a prospect that for some is terrifying.

It is the assessment of this work that the performance quality of *Rumors* was of a status that well represented the University of North Dakota’s Department of Theatre Arts. The production enjoyed a warm reception from audiences and virtually no major pacing, punch line, or honesty issues were found in the production with the addition of an audience. Also, this work argues that in educational theatre a large part of performance quality is the hidden growth that happens in rehearsal. It was an immense challenge for a number of the actors involved with *Rumors* that had never before acted in or even read a farcical play, but by the end of the *Rumors* process they were able to add another style to their resume and the production was able to help both the actors and the director grow as artists. It was especially valuable for students graduating or seeking summer stock employment. Farces are mainstays of many summer stock companies and the ability to audition and prepare a role for a farce is a skill to hone for any actor with a desire to work. For the many BFA Musical Theatre students, the combination of musical acting
and farcical preparation is an educational experience tailor-made to find work in the professional world of theatre.

The final portion of this work will be an assessment of the director's strengths and weaknesses. As stated in the intro to *Simon in Performance*, organization, vision, and leadership were the primary traits that the direction of *Rumors* would require. In the large scale of the rehearsal process, organization was a strength. The schedules, designs, and deadlines were all established early and the actors knew at least a week in advance what portion of the script they would be responsible for practicing throughout the process. A weakness in the area of organization was a slip up with the first run through of Act I off book. Both the actors playing Ken and Claire had conflicts for that fairly important rehearsal which led directly into spring break. Overall, the production felt well organized from the staging to the coaching and run. The second trait that was a goal to imbue into the process was that of vision. This work defined vision as a cohesive unitary notion for all facets of a production. This is a large feat and at times felt like a weakness. A vision seemed unattainable by virtue of an inherent perfectionism in the director that at times weakened the ability to step away from the work, meditate, and attack a problem from a different angle. The final product was very close to what was envisioned going into the process, but throughout the process times occurred where the vision seemed to take less precedence when an issue with style, blocking, or tech arrived. More thought should have been put into every question asked of the director in order to truly assess the repercussions of any given answer. Perhaps a more organized vision is one way to articulate a stronger combination of the mentioned traits. The final trait that the director
needed to display was that of leadership. From the introduction, a leader must be approachable, stalwart, and earnest in any endeavor. Every effort was made to be that figure. Successes and failures were both met, but the experience of directing on the main stage at the University of North Dakota was an adventure that one will not soon forget.

Throughout the course of this work, research and analysis were presented in order to prepare one to direct a production of Neil Simon's *Rumors*. Chapter 1, “Simon and Comic Technique” conducted research into the aesthetic of Neil Simon by creating biographical knowledge of Simon, the period during which he was created as an artist, and chronicling his career thus far. Upon gaining an understanding of Simon's work, the latter half of “Simon and Comic Technique” focused upon the direction of comedy on stage. With discourse on these two topics researched and presented, the work moved on to Chapter 2, “Analyzing for Performance.” “Analyzing for Performance” featured a full textual analysis of *Rumors* for use by the director and addressed any challenges that the University of North Dakota's 2014 production might expect to encounter. Finally, “Reflections of the Process” functioned as a vehicle to report the directorial findings from the rehearsal process of this production of *Rumors*. 
Works Cited


