

"It can be argued that Neil Simon is not only America's most successful playwright, but also the most successful playwright in the history of theatre."<sup>1</sup> Despite being criticized for lack of substance, his hugely successful comedies are consistently revived, whether on Broadway or in other community or dinner theatres. Last week the University of Notre Dame's Mainstage season opened with the departmental premiere of *Barefoot in the Park*. Though the play originally opened more than thirty years ago, the themes of compatibility and compromise that it presents are still relevant today. Simon masterfully manipulated the plot of *Barefoot in the Park* to include all of the elements of a fine play (intrigue, credibility, surprise, etc.) and to create a viable playscript that both emphasizes the play's major themes and, just as importantly, makes the audience laugh.

Simon has skillfully constructed the plot of *Barefoot in the Park* to showcase and emphasize his themes of compatibility and need for compromise. The plot itself starts out fairly simple. In the first act, Paul and Corie Bratter, wed but six days, move into their new apartment on the top floor of a brownstone in New York City. From the very first, the audience can see that these are two very different characters that have very different values, and yet Paul and Corie are very much in love. The plot progresses as other characters are introduced. First to visit the newlyweds is Corie's mother, Mrs. Banks. The relationship between Corie and her mother also involves a clash of very distinct personalities. With the appearance of the Bratter's eccentric upstairs neighbor, Victor Velasco, Corie sees the opportunity to play matchmaker and inject a little romance into her staid mother's life. The first act concludes with Corie's plan to bring the two together at an upcoming dinner party, much to the chagrin of her husband Paul. This creates intrigue--"that quality of a play which makes us curious (sometimes fervently so) to see 'what happens next'"<sup>2</sup>--because the audience is left wondering whether Corie's plan will work. Thus the first act provides exposition, creates a feeling of suspense, and begins to showcase the compatibility problems in the relationships of several of the characters.

The second act takes place in two parts: the first before Corie's dinner party, and the second in the aftermath. Throughout the first part of the act, Simon emphasizes the enthusiasm, spontaneity, and lack of forethought with which Corie approaches her matchmaking task. Paul, on the other hand, acts like "a stuffed shirt"<sup>3</sup> and tries to show Corie the foolishness of her plan. The evening, he says, "has fiasco written all over it!"<sup>4</sup> In addition to the widening gulf between the newlyweds, this scene also re-emphasizes the complete opposition of personalities between Mrs. Banks (Ethel) and Victor Velasco. Velasco cooks extravagant and exotic foods (despite not having any money) and doesn't even wear a coat in the middle of February. Mrs. Banks, on the other hand, sleeps on a board. The audience feels that the two of them are completely incompatible and that the evening is destined to be a disaster.

The second part of act 2 begins when Corie and Velasco come tangoing through the door of the Bratters' apartment. The audience's interest is immediately captivated as they wonder what has become of Paul and Mrs. Banks. The suspense doesn't last long, though, as Paul soon enters carrying his near-unconscious mother-in-law. As the evening winds to a close, Velasco offers to escort Mrs. Banks home to New Jersey, with presumably more licentious motives in mind. Meanwhile Corie and Paul begin the first major argument of their wedded life. Though Simon handles the fight with a light touch, the disagreement nevertheless shows the way that some couples can become blinded by differences and reluctant to compromise. Also, the events of the second act have led naturally to this point, creating an element of credibility (also known as the "internal consistency of a play"<sup>5</sup>). The second act closes with the rift between the Paul and Corie at its widest; Corie wants a

divorce and Paul is left to sleep out on the couch under the broken skylight.

The third act begins rather quietly, as Corie and Paul avoid each other and silently carry on their argument from the night before. The tension suddenly erupts when Corie receives a phone call from a relative explaining that Mrs. Banks never arrived home the night before. Fearing the worst, Corie climbs up to Velasco's "apartment" to ascertain her mother's whereabouts. Paul is surprised to see his wife return in tears minutes later. With perfect comic timing, the cause of Corie's outburst is revealed when her mother comes running in dressed in only Velasco's silk bathrobe. The injection of this element of surprise proves the skill with which Simon has constructed his plot: "Surprise is an essential ingredient of intrigue: a play that is truly intriguing is one that leads us to expect surprises and then appropriately rewards our expectations."<sup>6</sup> As Mrs. Banks tries to explain the awkward situation to her hysterical daughter, Paul finds opportunity to leave the apartment, clutching a liquor bottle in one hand and a suitcase in the other. At this point the narrative seems at its darkest; it seems as if every relationship in the play has self-destructed. The audience still expects a happy ending, but the plot has made the possibility of it actually happening seem small indeed.

Enter Victor Velasco. Though Mrs. Banks doesn't receive him warmly at first, her demeanor rapidly becomes friendlier as he relates the previous evening's events to her. This is almost a kind of denouement in the Banks-Velasco plot line. All the hidden events have been revealed, and the two characters reestablish their relationship. Velasco leaves after inviting Mrs. Banks to dinner; she accepts. Thus the resolution of her situation with Velasco teaches Mrs. Banks the worth of compromise and she can now help her daughter win back the love of Paul. Persuaded by her mother's impassioned advice, Corie is rushing to go look for her spouse when the audience is surprised again--Paul has returned. Corie is astonished to find that Paul is completely drunk, and she becomes even more astonished at the outrageous way her "stuffed shirt" of a husband is acting. In the hilarious climax of the play, Paul answers Corie's inquiries about his lack of socks with the answer, "I've been walking barefoot in the goddam park!"<sup>7</sup> The audience is pleased because Paul and Corie have both demonstrated an ability and willingness to compromise, and therefore the expectation of a happy ending has been fulfilled. Corie has recognized the error of her impetuous meddling and the need for forethought, while Paul has shed some of his inhibitions and managed to "let loose" for once in his life. Mrs. Banks' advice to Corie to "give up a little of [herself] for him"<sup>8</sup> has become applicable to both her daughter and her son-in-law. Thus the resolution of the play has fulfilled the audience's expectations, made them laugh, and reemphasized the major themes of the play.

Though the compatibility problems of two newlyweds, a crotchety old woman, and an eccentric pauper do not seem to generate much "substance" in a play, nevertheless Neil Simon manages to arrange the events that make up the plot of *Barefoot in the Park* in such a way as to include all of the elements of a fine play (intrigue, credibility, surprise, etc.). America's premiere playwright also creates a viable playscript that emphasizes the show's major themes of compatibility and compromise. And, perhaps most importantly, Simon's skill as a playwright is revealed in the wonderful way *Barefoot in the Park* makes the audience laugh.

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