

# Study Guide

Prepared by Jeremy Ehrlich  
and Karissa Chin



## About the Play

*Barefoot in the Park*, originally called *Nobody Loves Me* until director Mike Nichols suggested a catchier title, is a 1963 romantic comedy written by American playwright Neil Simon. It was Simon's first major Broadway success and helped establish him as one of the most popular comedic voices in American theatre during the 1960s.

### *Synopsis*

Newlyweds Corie and Paul Bratter move into a tiny fifth-floor walk-up apartment in New York City after returning from their honeymoon at the Plaza Hotel. Corie is energetic, impulsive, and eager to embrace their new life together, while Paul—an ambitious young lawyer—prefers order, stability, and practicality.

Their new apartment quickly becomes the center of comic chaos. Corie's mother, Ethel, worries about her daughter's unconventional lifestyle, while their eccentric upstairs neighbor, Victor Velasco, embodies the bohemian spirit of New York's artistic culture.

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Corie attempts to bring excitement into Paul's structured world, arranging an elaborate evening that pairs her cautious mother with the flamboyant Velasco. The evening spirals into absurd adventures across the city, revealing the growing tension between Paul's conservatism and Corie's spontaneity.

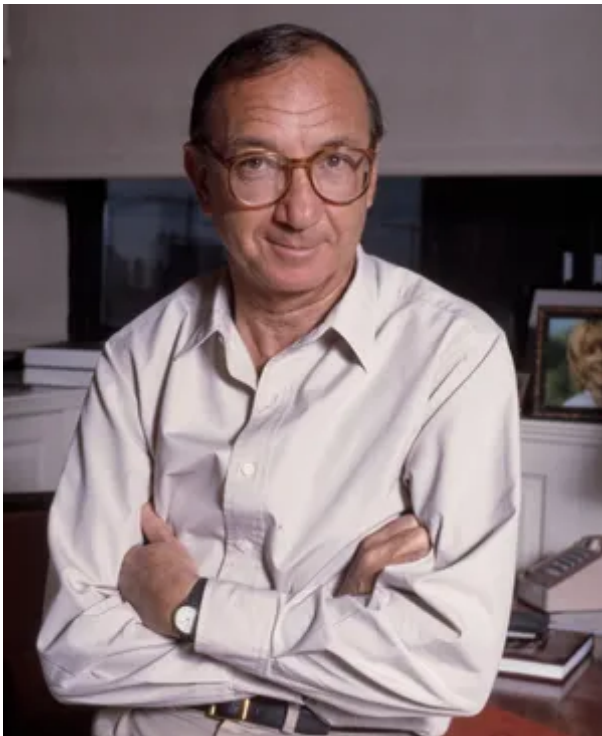
As the couple begins to question whether their personalities are simply too different, both must confront what compromise, adulthood, and marriage truly require.



Did you know?

*Barefoot in the Park* is part of a cycle of Simon plays dealing with the subject of marriage. *Come Blow Your Horn* (1961) is about a playboy who discovers that marriage is a part of life he has wrongfully eschewed, *Barefoot in the Park* observes newlyweds, and *The Odd Couple* (1965) examines divorce. *Chapter Two* (1977) shows a bereaved protagonist finding new life. (Whitton)

## About Neil Simon and His Comedy ✨

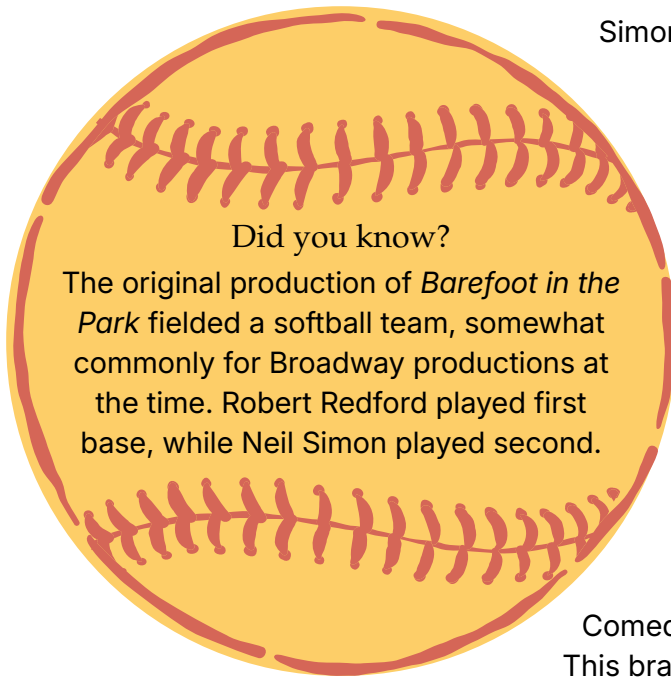


Neil Simon, c. 1986. Bernard Gotfryd Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Simon was born Marvin Neil Simon on July 4, 1927, in the Bronx, New York City. He dropped the "Marvin," he claimed, because he couldn't imagine anyone named Marvin playing for the New York Yankees. He had a difficult childhood; his parents fought and his father would desert the family for months at a time, occasionally leading Neil and his brother to live with relatives. He found escape through the movies, especially Charlie Chaplin. He enjoyed and learned to write comedy as a defense mechanism, laughing to forget what was hurting.

After high school, he joined the military; after being discharged, he got a job writing comedy for television (including Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, which became the source material for Simon's later play *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*). Simon wrote sketches for the Broadway show *Catch a Star!* in 1955, and his first Broadway play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, opened in 1961. *Barefoot*

*in the Park* was his second play on Broadway, and his first hit. It was more sophisticated than his earlier effort: the characters in *Come Blow Your Horn* were largely superficial types, while in *Barefoot*, Simon took care to write more realistic characters.



Did you know?

The original production of *Barefoot in the Park* fielded a softball team, somewhat commonly for Broadway productions at the time. Robert Redford played first base, while Neil Simon played second.

Simon's comedy can be traced back to the so-called New Comedy of the ancient Greek playwright Menander. The earlier Old Comedy of Aristophanes had presented outrageous scenarios, real-life politicians as characters, and political satire that brought his characters in for serious ridicule. Menander wrote a more realistic "comedy of manners" about domestic situations, and he mixed comic and tragic elements in his plays. He established the "boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl" format that Simon adapted for *Barefoot* and other plays.

Simon's works are a form of Menander New Comedy mixed with modern Jewish-American humor. This brand of humor, from the shtetl (a pre-war Eastern European largely Jewish town), was based in powerlessness and the use of humor to survive. It was often self-deprecating, with the goal to transcend victimhood. For Susan Koprince, "it fused sentiment with irony and self-satire with earthiness."

For most of his career, Simon's plays were typically ignored by critics, many of whom considered him a commercially successful playwright rather than a serious or important one. That somewhat changed with his Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for *Lost in Yonkers* (Simon himself had predicted a win that year for John Guare for *Six Degrees of Separation*).

Simon said that when people asked him which of his over 30+ plays was his favorite, he found the question impossible, but once added, "I'll tell you this though. Doing *Barefoot in the Park* was about as much fun as a playwright like me could have."



Ays Garcia as Corie and Arjun Pande as Paul. Photo by Giao Nguyen.

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### Did you know?

Neil Simon's comedy sometimes extended to his stage directions.  
The printed script of *Barefoot in the Park* includes:

"The room has just been freshly painted. Not carefully, maybe not professionally, but painted" (p.1);

"From the depths, possibly from the bottom of the earth, we hear a VOICE shout up" (p.2);

"DELIVERY MAN appears...from the way he is breathing, it seems the end is very near" (p.5);

and later of the same delivery man, "For the first time he gets out some words. They are...'Argh, argh'" (p.6).

## Mike Nichols' Direction

Mike Nichols was well known as a comic actor in the early 1960s; *Barefoot in the Park* was one of the first plays he directed, and his first on Broadway. His contribution—common now in comic acting but much less so at the time—was to insist that the actors treat each situation seriously, without an awareness that their actions were comic.

Neil Simon, for one, was surprised by the lack of laughs coming from the rehearsal room: "perhaps I had written a new socially conscious drama," he mused. But in fact, Nichols' great contribution was to find a level of believability in the play, keeping laughs out of the rehearsal room and leaving them for the audience.

Nichols completed his EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony) with an Emmy in 2001.



EGOT Winner Mike Nichols. Encyclopædia Britannica.

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## Cast & Characters



Ays Garcia

### Corie Bratter

*There are Watchers in this world and there are Do-ers. And the Watchers sit around watching the Do-ers do. Well, tonight you watched and I did. —Corie, Act II*

Early 20s. Corie Bratter is a true romantic; she believes in taking life by the horns and do-ing. A newly married young woman filled with energy and optimism, Corie is spontaneous, romantic, and determined to live life to the fullest. Her impulsive nature often clashes with Paul's practicality.



Arjun Pande

### Paul Bratter

*You're so impulsive. You jump into life. Paul is like me. He looks first. —Ethel, Act I*

26 years old. Corie's husband, a young lawyer determined to succeed professionally. Paul values structure, responsibility, and social respectability. His dry wit and seriousness often places him at odds with Corie's carefree spirit.

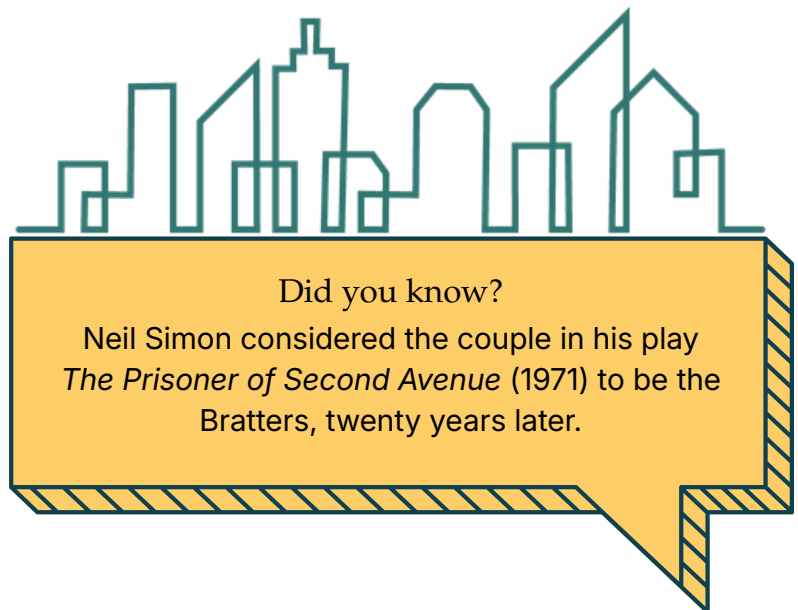
## Understudies



Kate Anders



Christian Bolduc





Alexandra Tavares

Mother

*She has a different set of values. She's practical. She's not young like us. —Corie, Act I*

Late-40s. Corie's cautious mother. Widowed and somewhat lonely, she represents the more traditional values of the older generation. Although initially uncomfortable with Corie's unconventional lifestyle, she gradually becomes more open to new experiences.



Michael Wu

Victor Velasco

58 years young. The Bratters' eccentric neighbor who lives in the attic above their apartment. Velasco embodies the bohemian culture associated with Greenwich Village. Mysterious, theatrical, and unconventional, he provides comic disruption to the Bratters' orderly world.

Delivery Man

An older man tasked with carrying gifts up the Bratters' exhausting flights of stairs.



Brian Pucheu

Telephone Repair Man

A practical and observant repairman who serves as a grounded contrast to the chaos unfolding in the apartment.

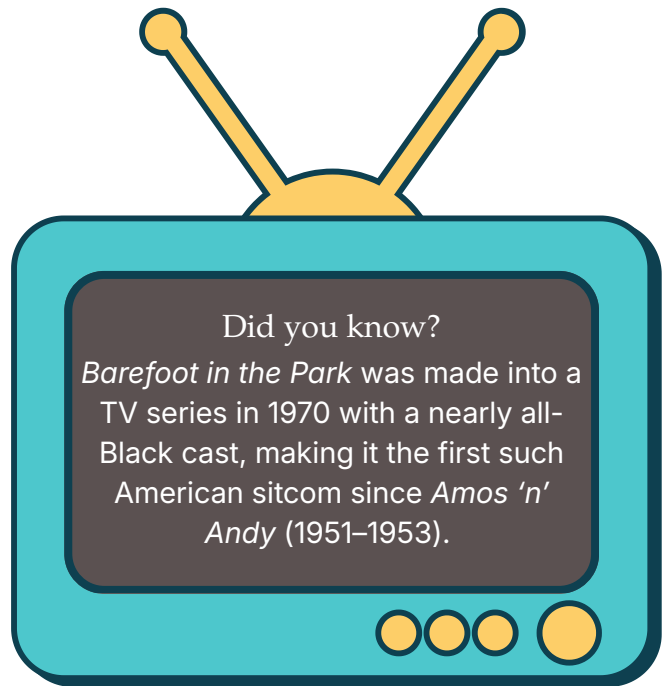
Understudies



Ellen Dessler Smith



Nolan Palmer



Did you know?  
*Barefoot in the Park* was made into a TV series in 1970 with a nearly all-Black cast, making it the first such American sitcom since *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951–1953).

# Setting

The city of New York plays a major role in both the setting and plot of *Barefoot in the Park*.

Map of New York in 1963



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## Q & A with Director and Producing Artistic Director: Karen Lund

Why did you choose to program this play for Taproot's 50th Anniversary Season?

Taproot is known for classic comedies, and it's a show that we haven't produced yet, and we've also had a lot of success with a couple of Neil Simon plays. And I thought it was interesting that this show is about difficult beginnings. In our 50th Anniversary Season it's kind of fun to explore, one, a romantic comedy; two, a classic comedy, but also a play about expectations when you start something. So, this is about the beginning of this marriage. What happens when your expectations aren't immediately met, and how do you persevere? And, in a lot of ways, that reminds me of the Taproot story, which is in itself a love story, so that's what got me excited about working on the show.



This play was written in 1963. What about it still speaks to audiences today?

Oh, I think it's still universal, the idea of romantic love, the idea of first love. What does it take to be in a relationship long-term? What are you willing to sacrifice, and what are you willing to give, and what can you get at the same time? I think it's a universal love story, and I think a lot of people will relate to, not just the young husband and wife, but also the mother and daughter, and their relationship. How do you move from being the child into adulthood, with your own home, and your own relationships? And where does the mother fit in now? So, I think there's a lot to be explored there.

What do you find funny in this play, and how do you want to direct this play to get at the humor?

I think the play is hilariously funny because it's all about unspoken expectation, and how it is that we live up to or fall short of our partner's unspoken expectations—what we all believe are givens in our relationship, and we find out later aren't givens at all. We have to learn how to communicate something that we thought when we were first falling in love was just natural and would happen on its own—we find out it becomes work. And being in that work is hilarious, especially when you think it's going to be easy. I think that people are just going to be delighted by the silliness, the freshness, and the fun of a rom-com. I think it will be funny because it will be universal—you'll be looking moment to moment going "oh yes, I've been in that moment myself."

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## Q & A with Dramaturg: Natalie Westgor ✨

What is a dramaturg, and what is your role on *Barefoot in the Park*?

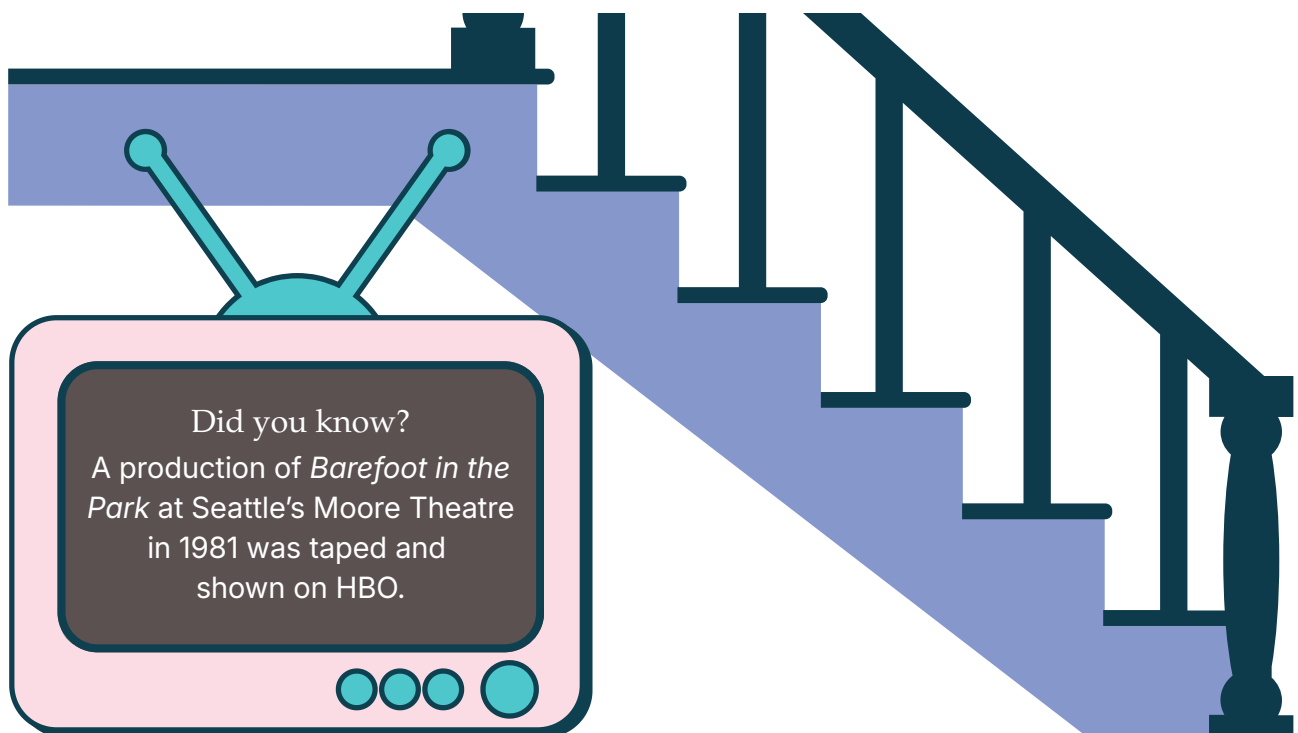
My job as a dramaturg is to provide historical and literary analysis of the play to the cast and creative team. Something that was important to me in working on the dramaturgy for *Barefoot* was capturing the energy of 1963. What songs might these characters be listening to on the radio? What movie billboards did they walk past on their way to work? What did it look, feel, and sound like to be a Greenwich Village beatnik?

What was something interesting you learned while doing research for this production?

*Barefoot in the Park* premiered a month before President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. This marked a shift in American culture, and is often considered the first year of the "counterculture" era of the 1960s. Thus, *Barefoot in the Park* represents an America in transition, with one foot (i.e., Paul) in the 1950s and one (Corie) in the 1960s.

What do you hope audiences will take away from this production?

I hope that audiences will leave with renewed optimism. I think this show speaks to the beauty and challenges that come with new beginnings. Life is rarely what we imagine it will be, but once we surrender fear and lead with love, life becomes more beautiful than we could have imagined. I hope this show reminds audiences that not all things worth having come easily, and that love is always worth fighting for.



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## Pre-show Discussion Questions

1. How was the world situation in 1963 similar to the world situation today? How was it different? (Click [here](#) to see the Encore program for a useful 1963 timeline of events.) How different (or similar) is the institution of marriage, 60+ years after the play was written?
2. The city of New York plays its own significant role in the play. Dig up some photos of New York in or around 1963. In what ways does it feel similar to today's world, and in what ways does it feel different?
3. Costume designer Nanette Acosta wanted Victor's costumes to be a mix of "'60s mod and '40s Hollywood." Click [here](#) to see some of the research photos she found to inform Victor's different looks in the play. What kind of costume do you expect to see on him? What kind of character do you expect Victor to be?

## Things to Think About While Watching the Play

1. The relationship between Corie and Paul is obviously at the center of this play. What is the effect of having a completely separate relationship onstage alongside the primary one? How does watching Ethel and Victor interacting cause us to reflect on Corie and Paul?
2. Corie and Paul are very different people. Do you relate more to one of them than the other at the beginning of the play? Does that change at all as you watch the rest of the play unfold, or does it remain the same?
3. Think about some of the problems the set designers had to solve in their design for this specific theatre space: the play moves from an unfurnished to a furnished apartment without the benefit of an intermission to move furniture. What kinds of space-specific solutions did they come up with?



Doll photo from [integritytoysdolls.wordpress.com](http://integritytoysdolls.wordpress.com)

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## Post-show Discussion Questions and Activities

1. Think about the characters' entrances after climbing up the many stairs to the apartment. Which characters had trouble with the stairs, and which didn't? How do you explain that difference?
2. Think about Corie at the end of the play. Has she given up a bit of herself, as her mother advised, or grown into a new moderation? How do we interpret this as a modern audience? What about Paul's transformation—do we find that positive, negative, or a bit of both? And how far do we think it will last?
3. Is an ending in which everyone finds their way to moderation dramatically satisfying? How might the political situation of 2026 change that response from earlier years?
4. Critic Walter Kerr wrote in 1983, "Because Americans have always tended to underrate writers who make them laugh, Neil Simon's accomplishments have not gained as much serious critical praise as they deserve. His best comedies contain not only a host of funny lines, but numerous memorable characters and an incisively dramatized set of beliefs that are not without merit. Simon is, in fact, one of the finest writers of comedy in American literary history." (Johnson) Compare your experience of watching this play with your experience of watching other comic plays and movies. Do you agree with Kerr about Simon's place in American literature?
5. Read a copy or watch a video of Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, which Simon considered a representation of the Bratters twenty years into their marriage. How does the action of this play change your view of Paul and Corie, and their marriage?

## Works Cited



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# Taproot Theatre Company's Education Programs



## Camps & Classes

Taproot Theatre Company's Acting Studio offers year-round instructional programs for theatre artists of all ages and experience levels. We are devoted to creating a nurturing environment to help students develop their unique gifts.

In addition to acting classes for adults, we offer improv classes for seniors experiencing early-stage memory loss.



## School Touring Productions

Taproot's Road Company uses research-backed strategies from the Committee for Children's Second Step curriculum to help students build empathy, manage emotions, and stand up for themselves and others. Since 1985, the Road Company has brought professional theatre to schools across Washington State, reaching more than 70,000 K-12 students each year with our dynamic bullying-prevention plays that educate and inspire.



## In-School Residencies & Workshops

From drama games to acting classes to putting on a production, Taproot Theatre's residencies bring educational theatre directly to schools. Our theatre arts professionals visit classrooms for workshops that excite students. Students develop basic acting skills and explore non-theatre curriculum using theatre as a medium.