

## **COME BLOW YOUR HORN: Pre-Rehearsal Interview with Director Jacob Murray**

*Jacob Murray is an Associate Artistic Director at The Royal Exchange. His productions there include DOG BOY, THE SANCTUARY LAMP, SHOOT THE CROW and THE DEAD WAIT in the studio and GREAT EXPECTATIONS on the main stage.*

### **How would you describe Neil Simon as a playwright?**

As the funniest comic writer for theatre alive (yes, even funnier than Ayckbourn)!

### **COME BLOW YOUR HORN was the first play Neil Simon wrote. How does the humour in it compare with his other plays?**

COME BLOW YOUR HORN has all the trademarks of later Neil Simon plays – very funny line-by-line dialogue, warmly drawn characters, an apartment setting. Where it differs is in its subtlety and sexiness. The relationship between Alan and Connie is fascinatingly drawn and Alan's journey throughout the play from playboy to something else is very interesting. People associate Simon with middle-aged comedies – THE ODD COUPLE, THE PRISONER OF 42<sup>nd</sup> AVENUE, THE SUNSHINE BOYS. COME BLOW YOUR HORN is young and sexy and very frank about sexual behaviour!

### **Which of the two brothers in the play do you think most resembles Simon himself?**

Buddy – the shy young kid who has done national service and aspires to be a playwright. Although you don't write Alan unless there's a little bit of you in there!

### **Have you seen the film version starring Frank Sinatra and if so how does it differ from the play?**

Yes I have seen the film. In fact that was how I knew about the play and why I wanted to do it. I saw it as a boy of about 13 quite by accident one Sunday afternoon and loved it. It must have made a huge impression on me because when I saw it again a year or so ago I was stunned at how vividly I remembered it almost shot for shot. I think it must have been because it's very much about the process of growing up from a boy to a man and also finding the woman you want to be with (the father thing was also quite interesting!). As a film it's pretty much identical to the play, except Meltzer is a Texan millionaire whose wife Alan is having an affair with. There's also one scene outside the apartment where Frank Sinatra, who is great as Alan, sings the song 'Come Blow Your Horn'. I imagine the producers thought 'Well we've got Frank in the movie – let's give him a song!'

### **With our knowledge of what happened to America in the swinging sixties – how do you think a modern day audience will accept Simon's sentimentalised view of New York in 1961?**

I don't think the play is too sentimental. You have to remember the play is set in the pre-Vietnam era when America had a much less dark and troubled view of itself. This was a time when Americans were on a high and New York was the greatest city to be in. The 1950s had been an era of unbroken economic success. Hollywood was booming and life seemed to be there for the taking. At the same time the US was on the verge of the sexual revolution which transformed the lives of women as well as men. I think COME BLOW YOUR HORN reflects this mood of optimism, of entering a new decade where the older generation's conservative ways could be left behind. Alan, Buddy and Peggy are looking to have fun. Having said that,

Simon is too clever and humane a playwright not to be aware that fun can hurt people and sometimes a lothario's lifestyle can have a cost. Connie is very clear with Alan about the emotional hurt he causes. That is what makes him think about his life afresh.

**Jack Lemon famously said of Simon that “even the leading characters who you are supposed to root for are absolutely flawed. They have foibles. They have faults. But, they are human beings; they are people we know.” Do you agree with what Jack Lemon said?**

Yes. The beautiful thing about Simon for me is his almost humanistic attraction and affection for the vagaries of human behaviour. Simon is never pompous. He has a true comic's vision. He sees us as flawed, muddled, but essentially rather beautiful creatures, riven with paradoxes and silliness. At the same time very few modern playwrights have as uncynical a view of the importance of love and relationships as Simon. His plays are often there to remind us that we cannot do without affection for and from others.

**How does Simon compare with other American playwrights such as Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill?**

I love all the great American tragic playwrights. Miller, O'Neill, Williams – fabulous. Simon isn't a tragedian though. His characters don't aspire to know God or seek to transform the world. Instead Simon deals with how ordinary people live their lives day to day. Enormous humour is found in the little battles we have trying to live with our fellow human beings as lovers, wives, husbands, colleagues and friends. What he does share with other writers is a real belief in the value of human nature. His characters are just as concerned about how they live their lives. Simon is one of the best playwrights for writing about how people really coexist with each other in marriages. No play ever beat BAREFOOT IN THE PARK for showing how a young couple embark upon the problems of living together or THE PRISONER OF SECOND AVENUE for showing how a long-standing marriage faces the mid-life crisis. Wonderful! One other thing about Simon is that he absolutely has his own style, which is as distinct as that of Williams or Miller et al. You can always spot a Simon line just as you can spot one of theirs. It calls for just as specific a set of skills from actors and directors.

**To what extent is the play influenced by Simon's experiences of writing for comedians Phil Silvers and Sid Caesar?**

Well there's no doubt that writing comic dialogue came out of that apprenticeship but I doubt it would have prepared him for constructing a three act play. Writing sketches or even a half hour comedy show would not have helped him follow a set of characters through a journey like that in COME BLOW YOUR HORN. The humour in the play works because it comes out of a real story and a real set of characters. But his work for Silvers and Caesar would have given him a real sense of what would make people laugh and would have helped him with some of the set-pieces in the play. He has written about how hard it was writing his first work for the stage. The result seems effortlessly smooth but he clearly sweated blood to get that effortless feel.

**Neil Simon is the most performed playwright of all time after Shakespeare. What do you think is the reason for his enduring appeal?**

He is just very, very funny. All his best scripts are stuffed full of wonderful jokes. After that, they are hugely accessible, the best are thought provoking and moving and all are based on a wonderfully life-affirming but very astute observation of human behaviour.

## **What role will music play in the production?**

We'll probably be using music from the late 50s and early 60s – Frank Sinatra, the Rat Pack (yes) but also some big-band jazz from the period – Count Basie etc. This play is very much in that tradition – style and swing rather than rock'n'roll. As its 1961 that's pre Bob Dylan and the Beatles. We want to go for that celebratory, sexy feel that people like the Rat Pack personified. **The film version was set in the middle of the Rat Pack era – who do you think would be a member of the Rat Pack today?**

Heaven knows! We just don't go in for that super-masculine, style look anymore. OCEAN'S ELEVEN tried to revive all that with George Clooney but it didn't stick much (and can Clooney sing??). It's a class thing. The Rat Pack were all about the American dream – a working class Italian, Hispanic and African-American rising to become the epitome of cool and class through nothing but their talent. It was about being upwardly mobile. Now its all about not wanting to look middle or upper class and competing to look as if everyone is penniless. It's just as much of a charade. Pop stars make millions but do all they can to look as if they sold the Big Issue. It's a bit insulting to those who really have nothing, really. This pretence at being downwardly mobile when everyone's got Hollywood mansions and private jets is as false as anything else.

## **Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin?!**

How about Sammy Davis Jnr!!!! Well if I must chose between Frank and Dean: Frank was the greater performer but Dean was the nicer guy!