

Must See Simon!?! Pela, Forgive Me.

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Chapter Two

by Neil Simon

Directed by **Robin LaVoie**

Tempe Little Theatre

The Tempe Performing Arts Center

(480) 350-8388

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\$12.00 - \$14.00

A production season without **Neil Simon**, though dreamed of, is regrettably inconceivable. A season with *six* productions seems cruel and unusual punishment. Halfway through the torture, the score is amazingly three-for-three in terms of enjoyment. **Tempe Little Theatre** has tapped **Robin LaVoie** to mount Simon's late-70s mid-career move into the realm of bio-play, *Chapter Two*. I'd never seen either a live production or the film, but figured that it would be another night of the usual wise-cracking one liners from enjoyably stock characters that would require me to invest as much emotion as a session in front of my X-Box. Surprisingly, this script is closer in spirit to his B-Cycle trilogy than his early and later farces. The fact that LaVoie was able to find four actors with specific strengths beyond comic timing to fill the culottes and leisure suits of **Vickie S. Wagner's** excellent period costumes helps to make this one of the best comedies I've seen from TLT.

Spy novelist George (**Walt Pedano**) is recovering from the death of his wife. His brother Leo (**Steve Milo**) is doing whatever he can to help George move on with

introductions to women and smart pep talks. Actress Jennie (**Jeanne Langston**) is dealing with her divorce from her ne'er-do-well hubby, and her sardonic friend Faye (**Deborah Weissman Ostreicher**) is playing yenta to knock her out of her well-ordered ways. Leo and Faye's machinations to get the two together work much better than they expect, and they all must deal with runaway denial on everyone's part.

My biggest quibble in this generally excellent evening is volume. Pedano and Langston are wonderful but hard to hear. They catch the humor and the tears equally well, but lack projection. LaVoie finds a way to keep everyone believably chasing around **Sharon Gonwa's** well-appointed split-location and split-level box set so that the action never slumps and the audience's eyes are always engaged. The pacing of the evening is modulated, switching between high gear insanity and arguments and the low gears of seduction and regret.

Pedano and Langston are perfectly in and out of tune with each other as needed. Pedano's offering of a New York intellectual is spiced with equal dashes of wit and self-effacement. He can be incredibly charming and absolutely grating at either end of a sentence, not easy to accomplish outside of the five boroughs. Langston is not quite believable as a television actress, seeming more the lovely model type without the requisite pluck and presence of a daytime drama performer, but even with this difference in styles, when she gets to the wild swings of love-too-quickly and painful realizations and rationalizing, she is creepily good at portraying the enabler. Most important, the two perform a stage kiss that fogged my eyeglasses just by watching. The sexual tension is just as believable as the strain of the morning after.

Milo and Ostreicher are equally amazing. Milo is an excellent comedian, and here proves adept as always, but he also aces a few moments of genuinely deep and darker emotions that makes his offering a 360° portrait of self-serving though well meaning men. Ostreicher is the ultimate gal pal, that peculiar brunette character in plays who never gets the guy but always gets the biggest laugh line. She takes presentationalism to a new height. It's hard to make these women into characters of depth, but Ostreicher is so genuinely warm and frazzled that she is precisely the kind of woman with whom I'd like to pal around.

Besides the great set and the amazing costumes, **Bob Nelson's** lighting and sound are uniformly excellent. LaVoie also adds this side-splitting moment that uses period late 70s songs to comment on the action at hand in a way that was so funny, I found myself hiccoughing for air.

Yes, this is me raving about a production of Simon. I know, I can hardly believe it myself. In fact, I'm going to say something that I never thought I would: You *must* see this excellent offering from TLT. At nearly two hours forty-five minutes, it's long, but nearly every second of the evening hits all of the emotional marks it sets out to, and there aren't many productions I can say that about.