Professor David Peimer | Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple"

So hi everybody, and hope everybody is well and able to enjoy, have had a good weekend, and that it's sunny wherever you are or it has been. And welcome. So we decided to make August, as I'm sure you know, a little bit lighter and a bit more fun for these sessions that most of us are doing. So we're going to focus today on a movie, or a play, which I'm sure everybody knows, Neil Simon's fantastic comedy, "The Odd Couple." 1968, as you can see here, is when the film was made. And I'm going to do a couple of things today, show a couple of clips from the film, and then show a fantastic interview with the BBC, with Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon, and also just talk a little bit about Neil Simon himself, and Walter Matthau in particular, and their careers. And the, I think often underestimated and extraordinary career that Neil Simon did and what he achieved, because I think that he has been underestimated, and I think often people have, in a way, sort of put him down a bit. And I know certainly in university worlds and the kind of worlds of art, et cetera, Neil Simon's sort of below, not as good as, A-B-C-D. But when you look at what this guy achieved, and when you look at the actual writing, and we will see, it's not easy, it's really hard to do this, and to achieve what he achieved, given the odds that he emerged from, I think is quite extraordinary. And of course, it's broad, light comedy with some serious plays that he did later. But I think it's shortsighted to call him a lightweight within American or global theatre. And I think often comedy can be underestimated and just how hard it is to write and how hard it is to act. So here's a bit of that debate - lightweight or not? Secondly, his Jewishness. Does he reflect a certain kind of Jewish humour, which is obviously immigrant and second generation immigrant, New York City, Jewish immigrant humour or not? What are his plays really about? Are they just these brilliant one-liners which are funny and witty, or something else? And just a little bit on how the comedy actually works and how to make the comedy work, which Walter Matthau, I think has one of the most interesting insights. And Mike Nichols did as well, you know, the great director.

Okay, so just a little bit on these guys first, just to remind everyone of the story, which I'm sure we all know, is that Felix has just been divorced, and he goes to Oscar, the Walter Matthau character, and Walter Matthau invites him in and says okay, you can stay with me in my apartment in Manhattan. And obviously then the rest of the story is the two of them together staying in the apartment, and Jack Lemmon's character, Felix's obsessions and neuroses, he's a neurotic freak, and Walter Matthau, the slobby, fun loving freak, if you like. So in essence, they are totally different. And Oscar's idea of emptying an ashtray, because he gets irritated with Jack Lemmon, is to throw it on the floor. Felix is obviously utterly anal retentive, to put it in a jargon way, drives everyone crazy, including his wife who, you know, they've just split, and he runs around the apartment cleaning up after Oscar, cleaning up after everyone, obsessed with

neurosis and cleaning and with hypochondriac with his health and so on. So they're not just opposites, I think, it's just that they're so different. And when Oscar's trying to have fun the whole time, Felix refuses, and both of them, what do they actually share? They are both writers, the one's a news writer, and the others for sports, for newspaper. Their wives have thrown them out. And in a way, as we all know, how not only opposites can attract in a friendship, but it's almost that they have such a deep love/hate for each other. And I think the love is obviously the deepest thing of all. It's something very powerful. I think, what Neil Simon's saying about friendship in the end. As Felix says, "I'm impossible to be married to." So they're self-aware, they know, you know, in Felix's case his obsessive, neurotic behaviour. And in Oscar, Oscar says, "Life goes on, even for those of us who are divorced, broke and sloppy." So they're aware of their own idiosyncrasies. And what we fall in love with as an audience is precisely that. Their human foibles, their follies, their idiosyncrasies. And so much of comedy relies on that. The ordinary foibles, the ordinary follies, you know, of human nature, which we all have. Our little obsessions, our desires, our idiosyncrasies, what we find funny, what we don't. We all know these things so well. And I think Neil Simon has such an acute ear and eye for that. And I think it's the ear that he picks up the rhythms of Jewish New York language, and speaking, and just sheer art of comedy. It's not so far from Molière, in certain ways.

And then of course, the great bitter joke, which is inside, you know, this play in particular, that the friendship comes to resemble an unhappy marriage or, in the jargon of today, incompatible, but basically unhappy, the love each other, but can't really get on marriage. The movie, and you have to remember, when it's made in the late sixties, it grossed over 44 million. So that's a profit of over 40 million dollars. It was the third highest-grossing film in America in 1968, which is an incredible achievement for a play, which is then made into a movie and it's, you know, the filming is really a form of the play. You know, it's not, I hate these words as sort of how does it adapt to the screen, but it's really a form of the play with the acting and the camera angles, the shots, which we will see. So he has achieved, because he wrote the film script as well, and Simon only slightly adapted the play script, but we will see what he achieved in that transition between the two and the respect that the movie director has for just trusting to the script and trusting to the play, knowing it will work.

"The Odd Couple," as I'm sure we all know, it then became, in 1970 to 1975, a TV series in the States with Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. The original "Odd Couple" Broadway cast was Walter Matthau with Art Carney, and then they brought on Neil Simon and others wanted Jack Lemmon. And this extraordinary chemistry between these two, Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon, which is incredibly rare to find in Hollywood, or anywhere, when you get such a chemistry between two

remarkable actors. And you're not going to believe this, but it's true. Originally the Hollywood producers wanted to cast Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason. Frank Sinatra in the Jack Lemmon character, Felix, the neurotic; and Jackie Gleason as the Walter Matthau, the cynic and sloppy guy. They were persuaded, to put it mildly, to not. Anyway, the rest is history. It was voted by the American Film Institute 17th on the list of the all-time comedies over the last 120 years or so. And that's including all the greats going way back to the silent movie era. "Some Like It Hot," the brilliant Billy Wilder, remarkable piece of work by the remarkable Billy Wilder, was voted number one. And I'm sure we're going to get onto Billy Wilder at some point later – "Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment," and all the other remarkable movies he made.

They made a sequel, 30 years later, "The Odd Couple II" which reunited Lemmon and Matthau. And I'm going to show two short clips from that sequel, which didn't have anywhere near the American or global impact the original did. And I think a couple of reasons for it. You know, it's so hard to trump what they have done in this particular play. Just to give you an idea of, you know, let's just have a look at them again. Let's just be reminded. This is a shot from the film. To see not only that they're much younger, of course, but for me, in that glance between the two, we get so much of the Walter Matthau that we come to love and the Jack Lemmon. The focus, the intensity, the comedy that they're creating, completely focused in the zone on each other. What these actors do, they listen to each other. Neil Simon talks about it in interview. You know, how much they would listen, not talking at, but talking to each other. It's such a simple technique of acting, but so important. Not just waiting for the cue or they're waiting for their line to come, but actively listening. You know, it sounds easy, but it's not. And these two have such a chemistry of how to do that and understand that with each other.

What's important is that Neil Simon, and here, we can see a picture of him, born in 1927 in New York and he passed away recently in 2018. He wrote over 30 plays and he wrote almost 30 screenplays, nevermind the TV work he did as well. I mean, this is a serious writer. He's committed to the art and craft of kiting in particular. He received more Oscar and Tony Award nominations than any other writer. And I think what's really crucial is that he grew up in New York City during the Great Depression. That's his absolute formative years. Same as Arthur Miller, we've spoken about, and others. It's so formative as we know, that era of growing up, Jewish, New York, immigrant family, immigrant world, during the Great Depression and the changes it brought. His parents had enormous financial difficulties, which affected their marriage, which in his own words was unhappy and unstable. And I think his word 'unstable' is probably the most accurate. And he talks about in his childhood, that he sought refuge in movies, like many others, especially the comedies, the early comedies of Chaplain, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and so on.

During the war, he served in the American Air Force Reserve and he wrote comedy scripts for radio and TV. And then I think the other formative period of his life was working on Sid Caesar's show called "Your Show of Shows," in 1950 where he worked with the great Carl Reiner, the remarkable Mel Brooks, and one of the greatest of all, I think, Woody Allen. Can we imagine for a moment, you've got Carl Reiner, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Neil Simon, and a couple of others, in the same room, day after day, writing for Sid Caesar, and how much, as young in 1950, and they're sparking off each other. They write a sketch and then they're getting feedback from each other, improving it, rewriting, reworking. Can we imagine the incredibly intelligent, brilliant, witty buzz that is going on amongst these remarkable group of writers? Of course, I've mentioned the main Jewish ones, and there were others who came and went. And obviously a certain kind of humour that came out of this. So these guys all know each other. The great comic writers, from New York postwar, know each other, they've worked together, they've helped each other, they've written together. And Neil Simon said it was the happiest period of collaborating in writing of his life. And others as well.

His first play was called "Come Blow Your Horn" in 1961, and he intentionally spent three years writing it. It had 678 performances on Broadway and began his massive career. But what's important is that he would not stop rewriting for three years until he felt it had reached a certain standard in '61. And then of course, followed by the great successes we all know: "Barefoot in the Park," "The Odd Couple," which won the Tony. The style ranges from fast to romantic comedy to more serious drama. He had 17 Tony nominations in his life and won three Tonys. In '66, he had four successful productions running on Broadway. Four for one writer on Broadway? He earned over a million dollars in that year, just in that one year.

Okay, his life. He's born in the Bronx, obviously to Jewish parents. His father, Irving, was a garment salesman. His mother Mamie was mostly a homemaker. He grew up in Washington Heights and in his school yearbook, his school friends described him as extremely shy and used to call him Doc. His childhood, in his own words, was marked by his parents tempestuous marriage and the financial hardship caused by the Great Depression. And I'm paraphrasing from his own writing here, in his memoir, his father often abandoned the family for months at a time. He'd come and go, his father, looking for work, looking to earn money, but it actually caused more financial and emotional suffering for him and his mother and his brother. And his mother and his father were forced to take in boarders, and at time, Neil Simon and his brother, Danny, were sent off to live with relatives, so that their room could be taken by boarders and they could earn a few bucks. This is again a quote from him in his memoir, "I never knew what the fights between my parents were about. She would hate him, but he would come back, she would take him back. In reality, I guess they loved each other, but also hated." And I think we get this absolutely in "The Odd

Couple." It's a love/hate relationship. But okay, it's between two friends. It's not a husband and wife and a marriage. It's unhappy, it's unstable, but they can't do without each other. They love and they hate. It's underneath something there. And that, for me, provokes a more profound question of what this play and a lot of his work is about, which is a search for stability, a search for belonging. Coming from the immigrant background, Jewish immigrant, New York City, the poverty of their childhood, the difficulties, the marriage, the Jewishness, trying to adapt, a search for belonging. It's such a Jewish theme, and such an immigrant theme, and a global theme. The search for stability, not only in the jargon, the word of security or happiness, or the unhappy marriage, but stability, just one day can be like the next day, more or less the same, you know, Monday and Tuesday are not going to be so different. Something more stable, something more settled, I guess, a desperate need that Neil Simon talks about in his own life, part of the immigrant culture, and in his words, the Jewishness of his culture. He said, "But on the other hand, I became a writer because of this childhood. I was determined to be independent of my family's emotional issues and it made me strong as a young man. That also made me a comedy writer because I needed to block out the ugly, the painful, of my parents and their terrible struggles with money, and I needed to cover it up with humour. I needed to laugh to forget that I was hurting."

He would spend a lot of time going to the library in high school, reading the great humorists Mark Twain, George S. Kaufman, S.J. Perelman, and so on. He got a job as a mail room clerk in Warner Brothers' offices in Manhattan. But, to his credit, he quit, and that's when he went to work with Sid Caesar and the other great writers that I mentioned. Where he talks about the most talented group of writers you could imagine that I could learn from. But he really learnt, you know. As I said, the first play, "Come Blow Your Horn," he rewrote 20 times in three years. 20 times the full draft, rewrite from beginning to end until he was happy.

He also worked as a script doctor. He helped to hone "A Chorus Line," 1975. He worked on many others, which he didn't take credit for and didn't ask, many other musicals and great productions that we all know and love. And then a phrase, which I think sums him up completely. And I'm quoting from him here, "Did I relax and watch my boyhood ambitions being fulfilled before my eyes? No, not if you were born in the Bronx, not if you grew up during the Depression, and you were Jewish, and an immigrant family. You don't relax and you're not going to ever be fulfilled. I had to write all the time, every day." So I think that is so much of what drives, and it's amazing how powerful that drive, to succeed, to belong, to find some stability, which has reflected all the way through certainly "The Odd Couple," and so many of his other plays.

Obviously "The Odd Couple" is set in New York, as many of his other

works are. And then of course, 1983, the beginning of the autobiographical trilogy: "Brighton Beach Memoirs," "Biloxi Blues," and "Broadway Bound," which he received the greatest scholarly and critical acclaim for. You know, suddenly scholars said, oh, this guy's actually a good, serious writer. Whatever that means. He had four Academy Award nominations, which is no mean feat for any writer. His comedy is obviously situational, it's located in a situation and obviously it's verbal more than visual. So how does the comedy work? You have a situation, you throw the characters in, and then you constantly test them in different situations and see what happens. And you take serious subjects, and yes, of course, you laugh to avoid weeping. And there's the rapid fire, quick-fire jokes, and the wise cracks. It's very urban, obviously New York, mostly. Let's never forget Beckett's great line from "Waiting for Godot": "You're on earth, there's no cure for that." You know, it's almost a line that you can imagine him almost coming up with. The other great Beckett line, and many of them, "Laughing wild amid severest woe." And of course Christopher Durang's play called "Laughing Wild," which takes from Beckett's line. "Laughing wild amid severest woe." Brilliant line from one of my heroes, Beckett. And we can get that combination between sorrow and laughter, between humour and suffering, and what he has talked about in his own life, without over intellectualising it at all.

It's obviously a highly sophisticated urban humour, so-called middle America, and it's apparently simple, everyday conflicts and events, which are the premises for the plays, and the problems, and the characters have to solve their problems. As Mamet talks about with theatre, where the character has to go on a quest to solve a problem, and that's the driving theatrical energy, if you like, in the play. And obviously he's going to value traditional values like marriage and family, it runs through the work, because he's constantly questioning how do you find stability? How do you belong? To somebody else or to a society? Can you belong? Can you find stability? Or is it a naive illusion? You know, some critics have described it as old-fashioned, and it's not contemporary. I don't agree. I think it's as old-fashioned as the ancient Greeks is today. Look at some of the stories of Chekhov, some of the short stories, not just the plays, but the short stories. Even Sholem Aleichem. The short stories, isn't there something of that? You need to belong, you need to find stability and some sense of, not only meaning, but something that you could just trust it'll be from week to week similar.

The characters for comedy are typically imperfect. They're unheroic figures. At heart, they are decent human beings. You don't have the fatal flaw of Macbeth vaulting ambition, and do anything, will kill, King Duncan, Banquo's sons, et cetera, in order to become the king. They don't have a fatal flaw or pride, you know, and after pride comes the fall. They're not heroic in this way. They're basically decent, but they are fundamentally imperfect, like all of us. Let's remember

at the end of Billy Wilder's brilliant, "Some Like It Hot," the great last line, the final line: "Well, I'm a man," says the Jack Lemmon character. And then the billionaire going off to the yacht, "Nobody's perfect." And I think that line is so brilliant because it captures so much of understanding of comedy. It goes to Molière, it goes to Monty Python, it goes to Spike Millie, so many of the comics we love. We're not looking for perfection, we're not even striving for it. The opposite is happening. Our natural foibles are coming roaring out. And what people enjoy is that these are fundamentally good human beings. They're not malevolent, they're not evil, they're not out to kill or destroy, but they can't help their foibles, their own internal imperfections, and that's what they know, and we as the audience know, and that's where the comedy lies.

There's an interesting scholar who has written about an ancient Greek writer called Menander, who used to write similar sort of domestic sitcom-type humour, two character scenes and the kind of wit and humour that was played with there. It's not just political satire or biting political satire, it's a bit of mixture of sort of Menander's work from Ancient Greece, and possibly Oscar Wilde. Oscar Wilde, the difference is, he's obsessed with class. He's Irish, you can never forget, and he's writing for the English upper class, and he is viciously satirising the English upper class. Neil Simon is not interested in being political in that way and satirising class, which gives Oscar Wilde a whole different kind of demonic edge. He's interested in bringing out these idiosyncrasies and foibles, and actually celebrating them in the end, and saying, well, you know, come on, we all got this. We all got our neuroses.

A very important moment happened for him when Mike Nichols was directing the play, and there were a couple of scenes, and he kept saying in the rehearsals, why is it not funny, why is it not working? And Mike Nichols turned to him, who was a Jewish immigrant, and said, because in these scenes, your characters are not likeable. So we're not laughing as much, we won't laugh. In comedy, we need to have likeable characters we can identify with quite easily. You know we're not, again, going for the heroic who then come on a great fall from some position of trying to attain heroism, like in tragedy. You're not following trying to be real and the feeling of the characters and making them believable. You've gone for the funny gags in these couple of scenes. And Neil Simon said it was one of the biggest lessons he learned from Mike Nichols, the director. That don't go just for the comic, the brilliant one-line gags, but go for the feeling between your characters. Go for the believability of your characters, and the comedy will come, instead of the other way around. Instead of writing the other way around, of going for the quick funny gags and the witty lines, and then trying to find our way to sort of put it into the characters. Let the characters determine it. And I think that moment with Mike Nichols really helped him, and he speaks about talking to some of those others he had been working with, the Mel Brookses and

the Woody Allens, and how they all changed to realise, follow the believability of character, not just the brilliant one-liner. And that's what the audience will follow with you. And it had such an influence on him.

There's also this phrase by an interesting critic, John Lahr, who talks about Neil Simon's characters are all frustrated, edgy, and insecure, and unstable. Not in a great tragic, dramatic, traumatic way, but in this way that I'm talking about. There is something edgy, frustrated, insecure of the lives that we all live, and that's what gives us stress, which we can either deal with through trauma, or comedy and wit. I think the Jewishness is fairly obvious in what I've said, and it's debatable. We can discuss whether the Jewish humour is something, because of the outsider position, obviously, the marginal outsider, you know, going back in Jewish history, is always the outsider position, looking to analyse, to understand, to fit in or not fit in, belong or not belong, assimilate, not assimilate, and coping with it through humour and wit. It's so obviously Jewish and it's so obviously part of an immigrant psyche as well, which a lot of other scholars and biographers have written. We can't forget that he has a compassion for his characters and for human nature. And a lot of writers, I think miss that. You know, where they don't have a compassionate. We need to like them as audiences. And obviously he's dealing with urban, in New York City. And he says his only advice that he can give to aspiring comedy playwrights, "Don't try and make it funny. Try and make it real, believable, and let the comedy lines come." And he would talk about how, so many situations in his own life were so sad, and painful but, you know trying to use this humour all the time.

Okay, we get the debate, you know, is he taken seriously or not? What I've tried to present here today is, in a way, a sense of just how serious he was, how committed he was to his writing, tenacious, and the remarkable, relentless achievements and always trying to improve, always trying to write something better and different. Okay, let's start with a couple of scenes from this great film and this great play.

(A video clip from the 1968 film "The Odd Couple")

- [Felix] Oscar, you're asking to hear something I don't want to say, but if I do say it, I think you ought to hear it.

- [Oscar] You got anything on your chest besides your chin you better get it off.

- [Felix] All right then you asked for it. You're a wonderful guy, Oscar. You've done everything for me. If it weren't for you, I don't know what would've happened

to me. You took me in here, you gave me a place to live. You gave me something to live for. I'm never going to forget you for that, Oscar. You're tops with me.

- [Oscar] If I've just been told off, I think I may have missed it.

- [Felix] It's coming. You are also one of the biggest slobs in the world.

- [Oscar] I see.

- [Felix] Totally unreliable.

- [Oscar] Is that it?

- [Felix] Undependable-

- [Oscar] Finished?

- [Felix] -and irresponsible.

- [Oscar] Keep going, I think you're hot.

- [Felix] Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no keep going. That's it, you've been told off. How do you like that?

- [Oscar] Good.

- [Felix] Good?

- [Oscar] Because now. I'm going to tell you off. For six months I lived alone in this apartment, all alone in eight big rooms. I was dejected, despondent, and disgusted. And then you moved in, my closest and dearest friend. (Crying) And after three weeks of close personal contact, I'm about to have a nervous breakdown. Do me a favour will you, Felix? Move into the kitchen, live with your pots, your pans, your ladles, your meat thermometers. When you want to come out just ring your bell and I'll run into the bedroom. I'm asking you nicely, Felix, as a friend. Stay out of my way.

- [Felix] Walk on the paper, will ya? I washed the floor in there. Hey, stay away from me, Oscar.

(Doorknob rattling)

- [Felix] Hey, Oscar, Oscar, stay away from me, Oscar, all right.

- [Oscar] I'm not kidding, this is the day I'm going to kill ya.

- [Felix] Oscar, now Oscar!

Okay, that timing of that moment. You know, "Walk on the paper, I washed the floor." It's extraordinary timing, extraordinary looks at each other. They're not playing it for the gags. They're playing it to be believable. Okay, this is another one of the great scenes between the two.

(A video clip from "The Odd Couple")

- [Felix] It's funny, isn't it, Oscar? They think we're happy. (Chuckles) They really think we're enjoying ourselves. Well, they don't know. They just don't know what it's like living alone, do they?

- [Oscar] I'd be immensely grateful to you, Felix, if you didn't clean up just now.

- [Felix] Just a few things. But playboys, us. It's really funny. I think they actually envy us. Well, they should only know.

- [Oscar] Felix, will you leave everything alone please? I'm not through dirtying up for the night.

- [Felix] But don't you see the irony of it, huh? Don't you see the irony?

- [Oscar] Yes, I see it.

- [Felix] I don't think you do. I really don't think you see it.

- [Oscar] Felix, I'm tellin' ya, I see the irony of it.

- [Felix] All right, then tell me what is it? What's the irony?

- [Oscar] The irony is that unless we come to some other arrangement, I'm going to kill you. That's the irony of it.

- [Felix] What's wrong, Oscar?

- [Oscar] Something wrong with this system, that's what's wrong. I don't think that two single men living alone in a big eight room apartment should have a cleaner house than my mother.

- [Felix] Well, wait, what are you talking about? I didn't say you have to do it. You don't have to clean up.

- [Oscar] Well, what you do is worse. You're always in my bathroom hanging up my towels. Whenever I smoke, you follow me around with an ashtray. Last night I found you in the kitchen, washing the floor, shaking your head, and moaning, "Footprints, footprints."

- [Felix] I didn't say they were yours.

- [Oscar] Well they were mine, damn it. I have feet and they make prints. What do you want me to do? Climb across the cabinets?

- [Felix] No, I just want you to walk on the floor!

- [Oscar] Oh, well I appreciate that, I really do.

- [Felix] All I'm trying to do is keep this place livable. I didn't know I irritated you that much.

- [Oscar] Leave my pictures alone.

- [Felix] I was just trying to even 'em up.

- [Oscar] I want them uneven, they're my pictures. Even up your own pictures.

- [Felix] I was wondering how long it would take.

- [Oscar] How long what would take?

- [Felix] Before I got on your nerves.

- [Oscar] I didn't say you got on my nerves. Please don't do that.

- [Felix] Same thing, you said I irritated you.

- [Oscar] No, you said you irritated me, I didn't say it.

- [Felix] What did you say, Oscar?

- [Oscar] I don't remember what I said. What's the

difference what I said?

- [Felix] It doesn't make any difference. I was just repeating what I thought you said.

- [Oscar] Well, don't repeat what you thought I said, repeat what I said. My God that's irritating.

- [Felix] You see, you did say it.

- [Oscar] I don't believe this whole conversation.

- [Felix] Oscar, I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me.

- [Oscar] And don't pout. You want to fight, we'll fight, but don't pout. Fighting, I win. Pouting, you win.

- [Felix] You're right, you're, you're right. Everything you say about me is absolutely right.

- [Oscar] And don't give in so easily, will ya? I'm not always right, sometimes you are right.

- [Felix] You're right, I do that. I always figure I'm in the wrong.

- [Oscar] Only this time you are wrong and I'm right.

- [Felix] Oh leave me alone.

- [Oscar] And don't sulk, that's the same as pouting.

- [Felix] I know, I know. Oh, damn me, why can't I do just one lousy thing right?

(Felix starts to throw a cup, then stops)

- [Oscar] Why didn't you throw it?

- [Felix] I almost did. Sometimes I get so insane with myself.

- [Oscar] Then why don't you throw the cup?

- [Felix] I'm trying to control myself.

- [Oscar] Why are you trying to control yourself?

- [Felix] What do you mean why?

- [Oscar] I mean you were angry. You felt like throwing a cup. Why didn't you throw it?

- [Felix] Because I would still be angry and I would have a broken cup.

- [Oscar] Well, how do you know how you'd feel? Maybe you'd feel wonderful, huh? Why do you have to control every single thought that comes into your head? Why don't you let loose once in your life? Do something that you feel like doing. Not what you think you're supposed to do? Stop controlling yourself, Felix. Relax, get drunk, get angry. Come on, break the lousy cup.

- [Felix] Ow, I hurt my arm.

- [Oscar] You're hopeless. You're a hopeless mental case.

- [Felix] Shouldn't throw with that arm, I got bursitis.

- [Oscar] Why don't you live in the closet? I'll leave your meals outside the door and slide in the newspapers.

- [Felix] Oh cut it out, Oscar. I hurt easily and that's the way I am and I can't help it.

- [Oscar] Oh, you're not going to cry, are ya? I think all those tears dripping on your arm is what gave you bursitis.

- [Felix] Let me tell you something, Oscar. I may not be the easiest person in the world to live with, but you could have done a lot worse, a whole lot worse.

- [Oscar] How?

- [Felix] I put order in this house. For the first time in months, you're saving money. You're sleeping on clean sheets. You're eating hot meals for a change. And I did that.

- [Oscar] Yes, that's right. And then at night after we've had your halibut steak and your tar-tar sauce, I have to spend the rest of the evening watching you Saran Wrap the leftovers. Felix, when are you and I going to have some fun, a little relaxation? Get out of the house?

- [Felix] What are you talking about? We have fun. Eat over the plate.

- [Oscar] Fun? Oscar, getting a clear picture on channel two is not my idea of whoopee.

- [Felix] We don't always watch TV. Sometimes we read, sometimes we talk.

- [Oscar] No, I read and you talk. I try to work and you talk. I go to sleep and you talk. We got your life arranged pretty good but I'm still looking for a little entertainment.

- [Felix] What are you saying, I talk too much?

- [Oscar] Nah, I'm not complaining. You got a lot to say. What's worrying me is I'm beginning to listen.

- [Felix] You're not going to hear another peep out of me.

- [Oscar] You're not going to give me a haircut, are you?

- [Felix] I'm going to cut up some cabbage and greens and make coleslaw for tomorrow.

- [Oscar] I don't want any coleslaw for tomorrow. I just want to have some fun tonight.

- [Felix] I thought you liked my coleslaw.

- [Oscar] I love your coleslaw. I swear, Felix, I love your coleslaw. I'll take your coleslaw with me to work tomorrow, but not tonight. Let's go out of the house.

- [Felix] All right, let's go. I only make it for you. I don't like coleslaw. If you wanted to get out of the house, why didn't you say so in the first place? You think I like working and slaving in the kitchen all day long?

To me it's extraordinary. You know, looking at it, this is probably what? 50, 60 years later, and the lines, and the way these guys are acting, again, they're going for believability, not just the quick wit of the comic line. And it is so obvious how it just mirrors so many marriages, so many relationships, friendships, you know, this constant tennis match, or it can be much tougher than a tennis match. When one knows another person so well, how it doesn't stop and you kind of get onto the horse together and you have to ride that horse together

whether you like it or not. This endless love/hate. It's so powerful. And for me, so much of comedy relies on it and I think it's in the writing, but these two actors are so brilliant that they know how to bring it out as believable characters. Okay, I want to show here, this is one of the early scenes, which I'm sure everybody remembers. Playing poker.

(A video clip from "The Odd Couple" film)

(Door closes)

- [Man] What are you crazy, letting him go to the john alone?

- [Man] Suppose he tries to kill himself?

- [Oscar] How is he going to kill himself in the john?

- [Man] Whaddya mean, how? Razor blades, poison, anything that's in there.

- [Oscar] Nah, that's the kids' bathroom the worst he could do in there is brush his teeth to death.

- [Man] He could jump.

- [Man] That's right, isn't there a window in there?

- [Oscar] Yeah, but it's only six inches wide.

- [Man] Yeah, well he could break the glass, he could cut his wrists.

- [Oscar] He could also flush himself into the East River. I'll tell ya, he's not going to try anything.

- [Man] Shh, shh, listen, listen.

(hurried footsteps)

- [Man] He's crying.

- [Man] Ya hear that, he's cryin'.

- [Man] Isn't that terrible? for God's sakes, Oscar, do something, say something.

- [Oscar] What? What do you say to a man who's crying?

Okay, I'm going to show an interview with the BBC with Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon where Walter Matthau talks about the acting and the approaches and the understanding of the characters, which links here very much.

So I'm going to hold on that comment for a moment and rather want to show another scene here. This is of course one of the well-known scenes in the diner.

(A video clip from "The Odd Couple" film)

- [Felix] Cold. It's the air conditioning. Why do they always train those things up so high? I'll probably get the flu.

- [Oscar] You want me to ask them for a blanket?

- [Felix] You got to be very careful with air conditioning, you know. Francis and I, we've got one in the bedroom, I never let her turn it on in the summer.

- [Oscar] Oh, she must be crazy about that.

- [Felix] Come on.

- [Oscar] Where you going?

- [Felix] Come on, let's move to another table. Ah ha ha, I knew it. (Sniffing and humming)

- [Oscar] What's a matter now?

- [Felix] Oh, I got this, my ears are filling up. I got this sinus condition, it's the change in temperature. I always get it from air conditioning. Hmm, meh (clears throat)

- [Oscar] Well maybe it'll go away.

- [Felix] No, it's all part of my allergies. I get 'em in the summer. (Sniffing)

- [Oscar] Only in the summer?

- [Felix] Nah, and in the winter too. I get 'em all year long. Allergic to foods, and pillows, and curtains, and perfumes. Can you imagine that? Allergic to perfumes? That used to drive Francis crazy. For a while she couldn't wear anything except my after

shave lotion. I was impossible to live with.

(Shouting loudly)

- [Oscar] Stop that will you? What're you doing?

- [Felix] I'm trying to clear up my ears, flah. You create a pressure inside your head, it opens up the eustachian tubes, nah (shouts loudly several times)

- [Oscar] Did it open up?

- [Felix] I think I strained my throat.

For me, so much of the comedy lies in Walter Matthau's reaction. He plays it so deadpan. He understates it. And I think we enter the comedy, and enter the play, through the Walter Matthau character because we all want to do that and be that. And Walter Matthau interestingly said that he thought in the movie, he should play the Jack Lemmon character because it's much harder. That his own character, the Walter Matthau character, that's where all the comedy lay and that the Jack Lemmon character has it much harder to act because there's no comedy. He's such an irritating, obsessive neurotic. So it's fascinating that Walter Matthau completely understood where the comedy lies and which is the much harder part to act between the two. But what he does so brilliantly, he just has such an understatement, glances, looks, irony. You know, that phrase about irony in the earlier clip. He absolutely plays ironic all the time, Walter Matthau. Jack Nicholson understands completely not to play ironic. And that's such a difference in all drama, you know, we call the ironic voice in drama. Always look for it. Whether it's a theme, whether it's an idea inside a character's dawning realisation. And he knows it, Walther Matthau. Not only is he angry and upset, but he plays it with irony every moment. He's the double, the character's, he's the double. Jeremy Corbin, as I'm sure many people know, said in England that Jews don't understand irony, which was one of the biggest insults that I ever saw happening to Jewish English people ever, and of course many others. And if there's one quality that is completely, you know, inside Jewish humour, it's irony. But how it's played here, it's set up for the Walter Matthau character beautifully.

Just to tell you briefly, actually, before we go into one or two other clips, what's fascinating is that they met through Billy Wilder, for me one of the greatest of all time. "Fortune Cookie," "Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment," I mean these are remarkable movies. "Front Page." Walter Matthau has won an Academy Award for "The Fortune Cookie," in '66. Of course he created "The Odd Couple," the role here, got the Tony Award. What's interesting is that he grew up on the Lower East Side. His mother Rose, was Lithuanian Jewish immigrant, and she worked in a garment sweatshop, working the machines. His mother,

Milton was Ukrainian Jewish immigrant and a peddler from Kiev. As a boy, Matthau attended Jewish camps and he went to some Yiddish theatre, et cetera, in New York. In World War II, he was in the Air Force, the American Air Force, and was part of the crews of B-24 bombers. And that's where he befriended James Stewart and met some others. He flew many missions, especially over the Battle of the Bulge period. So, you know, these guys really lived. I mean the Great Depression, Neil Simon, you know, Walter Matthau similar, very, very, extremely poor background. And then, you know, seriously involved in the war. He came back, trained in acting, and was told that he often looked like a skid row bum. I mean here he's creating this sort of grumpy, sloppy character, you know, he's creating and working it with the ironic voice as an actor, which is the brilliance. He had three heart attacks. First heart attack many years ago in the Billy Wilder movie. Let's just remind ourselves, he had a lead in "Hello Dolly." He had a lead in "Cactus Flower." He and Jack Lemmon made 10 movies together. That's extraordinary. At this level of acting, and the level of Hollywood, that's quite incredible.

Jack Lemmon, interestingly, by contrast, he acted in over 60 movies, which is phenomenal. He was nominated for an Academy Award eight times. He won twice. "Some Like It Hot," we all know, it's a brilliant part he plays with Tony Curtis. "The Apartment," "Glengarry Glen Ross." I mean, look at the range of stuff this guy's done. His father was the president of the Doughnut Corporation of America. So he came from an upper middle class at minimum. Probably upper class, American background. Irish Catholic. But interestingly, and that's why he's touching his ear a lot in that diner scene, he had three major operations on his ear and other parts of his body, and he was in hospital for two years before he was 12 years old. So his childhood trauma, if you like, was that. He went to Harvard, didn't stay that long. He was in the American Navy during the war. As I said, worked with Billy Wilder and they all talk about Billy Wilder and there's fascinating interviews with Billy Wilder, talking about working with Jack Lemmon and Matthau and the others. Paul Newman offered him the role of the Sundance Kid in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" because Paul Newman was so grateful because Jack Lemmon had helped him so much in various ways. Lemmon was smart, very smart, and smart enough to turn it down. In Billy Wilder's biography called "Nobody's Perfect," he said "Happiness for me was working with Jack Lemmon. Jack Lemmon once told me that he lived in terror his whole life. That he'd never get another job, he'd never act again. Here was one of America's most established and greatest actors, one of the greatest I ever worked with, and yet he had no confidence. It was like every job was going to be his last." Now that's extraordinary. This is about, you know, Jack Lemmon.

Okay, I want to show two other clips from the movie they made later. Well, in particular, this clip, which is the 30 year later one where they're driving together in this great classic car scene.

Actually, I'm going to hold it there and I'm going to show rather this interview with Michael Parkinson on the BBC.

(A video clip of BBC interview with Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon)

- [Michael Parkinson] What do you really think of Mr. Matthau?

- [Jack Lemmon] He's the best actor I've ever worked with. I think that with all of the great things that he's done, he has really barely been tapped. I really mean that too. I mean, I think the man is capable of playing everything under the sun practically, and deep tragedy to obviously broad comedy. His performance in this, I think, is the best comedy performance I've ever seen.

- [Parkinson] That's wonderful, I agree with you. Well, let's bring on this untapped reservoir of a talent, shall we?

- [Lemmon] All right.

- [Parkinson] Mr. Walter Matthau.

  (Audience applauds)

- [Matthau] Thank you, thank you.

- [Parkinson] That was a very fulsome speech that Mr. Lemmon made.

- [Matthau] I didn't hear what he said.

- [Parkinson] Of course you did.

- [Matthau] No, what did he say?

- [Parkinson] He said you're an untapped reservoir of great talent.

- [Matthau] He's lying. I have been tapped and I'm all out of it.

- [Parkinson] Really, it's finished?

- [Matthau] Whatever talent I had is out.

- [Parkinson] It's finished now, is it? This is the

end of the line. I don't believe that for a moment.

- [Matthau] No, it's absolutely true.

- [Parkinson] Of course people assume that that film was the start of your relationship and in fact it wasn't, was it? I mean, you made?

- [Lemmon] No, "Fortune Cookie."

- [Parkinson] "Fortune Cookie" before that. How in fact did you get together in the first place? What was the mechanics of it?

- [Lemmon] I guess it was Billy. 'Cause Billy had wanted to write for Walter before, and as a matter of fact, originally, in "Seven Year Itch," he wanted Walter, and as it turned out through studios and this and that, Walter at that point didn't have a big name in film, although he was a leading actor on Broadway and in the theatre. And he kept thinking of Walter, and then finally, with "Fortune Cookie," he wrote the part of ol' Whiplash Willie there, with Walter in mind.

- [Parkinson] But is it true, in fact, that the roles were reversed? That you were supposed to play the lawyer part? Was that true or not?

- [Lemmon] No, it's not true, no, no, not in that. But it is true in "The Odd Couple" that he always wanted to play my part.

- [Parkinson] Did he?

- [Lemmon] Yeah.

- [Parkinson] Why?

- [Lemmon] Always.

- [Matthau] Well, originally I did it on the stage with Art Carney.

- [Parkinson] Right.

- [Matthau] And I thought the Carney part, or the Lemmon part, was the more difficult part because my role was easy. I mean, you phone it in. Every line was

a laugh. I mean it was simple.

- [Parkinson] Oh sure.

- [Matthau] I had all the laughs. Felix Unger was just a drudge. He became like the unsympathetic wife in a soap opera and he had no laughs. Art Carney on the stage, he went crazy with that. I mean, he started drinking like a fish. And he was taking pills and he got divorced during the run of the play. And he would get out of the hospital Monday morning. And he'd get out on the stage. I swear to you.

- [Parkinson] Sure.

- [Matthau] Monday night he'd say things like, well what's the matter, Oscar? Afraid of double headers? How are you Oscar? The thing is, Oscar. On Thursday night he said (mumbling). It got so that I played the entire thing with my back to the audience. Now we didn't have any such trouble with Lemmon in the movie. As a matter of fact, that movie was going to be made with Jackie Gleason and Frank Sinatra.

- [Parkinson] Really?

- [Matthau] Yes.

- [Parkinson] Those two?

- [Matthau] They do that, ya know? And Lemmon. They do that in Hollywood. Now there's Whoopi Goldberg today, for example, who is a magnificent black actress. But I understand she's going to do "The Diary of Anne Frank." It's a little silly. Really, it's silly. I mean, she shouldn't be doing "The Diary of Anne Frank."

- [Parkinson] What should she be doing?

- [Matthau] Well, she can do, as a matter of fact, I'm going to do a picture with her called "Born Yesterday."

- [Parkinson] She got the Judy Holiday part?

- [Matthau] She's got the Judy Holiday part. Now, you know, Judy Holiday was a blonde with ample breasts, and ample derriere, and other amples.

And Whoopi Goldberg is not exactly a sex symbol. And she's been cast in the Judy Holiday part and I am her billionaire boyfriend. And I take her to the hotel room and I take her wherever, you know, and people assume that she is my wife. Now, would you, would anybody believe it? I want to know. Before I do the movie. I'm worried about it.

- [Parkinson] Yes, indeed.

- [Lemmon] But she's such-

- [Matthau] You wonder why I hang out a good actor.

- [Lemmon] -with this guy?

- [Matthau] Will you shut up, you're talking too much.

- [Lemmon] All right, all right. Oh God.

- [Parkinson] Have you worked with many sex symbols in your career?

- [Matthau] Yes, my first play was an English play. I mean, I played an Englishman. It was "Anne of a Thousand Days" and it was 1948. And I covered abut six men. The youngest man was 76. I was 27. I remember my first part in it was the courier to the Duke of Northumberland. My lines were, "I've ridden 38 hours and I'm dead for sleep. This is for the Lady Anne. No one's to know." And I collapse. Now, in order to get collapsible, I used to do knee bends, and in Philadelphia, opening night, I did 65 more knee bends than I usually did, but I came out on stage and I collapsed before I could get the letter.

(Audience laughs)

I was on the floor and I said, "I've ridden 38 hours. And I'm dead for sleep as you can plainly see." So they cut that out. And then one day I went on for an 86-year-old man name of Harry Irvine, and I was playing Bishop Fisher. And Rex Harrison, who was King Henry VIII, couldn't believe that I had the audacity to get out on stage and play an 86-year-old English bishop trying to dissuade Henry VIII from breaking with the Catholic church. Joyce Redman, who was Anne Boelyn, wouldn't look at me. She looked up. And Rex Harrison. And I came out, and the guy was about 78, name of Russell Gauge said, "But Bishop

Fisher is the eldest and wisest amongst us and so he will speak first." And so I. I said, "I've known you from a child King Henry. I was present when you took your first three steps." At which point he turned his back to the audience and he said, "oh" and then a very rude word, beginning with an 's.'

- [Parkinson] Oh shit, he said?

- [Matthau] Yes. And for the next 10 minutes, all I could hear was people in the audience saying, "I think he said shit."

- [Parkinson] Sadly we've run out of time for this show, but we're not going to let this double act go, because in fact we're going to sit here and talk some more and the results of our endeavours will in fact be seen at a later date. In the meantime, Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, thank you very much indeed, and thank you for watching, bye bye.

Okay, amazing to watch interviews where the interviewer lets the actual guests really speak. But what I want to say at the end here is what Matthau does, Walter Matthau is doing, is he's bringing irony all the time. That subtle deadpan way of speaking, you know, there's always two or three things going on in every thought, in every phrase, which he brings into the character, which I think Neil Simon has written into the writing. And it's deceptively simple, but it ain't. It's tough to write that kind of thing and tough to act it. And whether we call it very Jewish or we just call it part of great humour, that sense of the ironic, of being in and out of something at the same time, and understanding the word ironic in comedy, the word ironic in acting, and telling a story, like he's telling here in an interview and he knows it all the time.

I'll leave you with a final thought. Paul Simon once said that the reason he can never sing with Bob Dylan is because Dylan sings with irony in that voice all the time. There's always two or three things going on, you know, it's serious and it's not serious, it's emotional and it's not. Whereas he can only sing one register, Paul Simon, being honest about it. I think an amazing insight of two other brilliant artists. So I leave that with you and share it. And obviously the stories that are told by these comic actors are, you know, the simple human foibles yet again. Which is what what Neil Simon, you know, understands in these, in anybody's simple life. And I use that word thoughtfully, not simplistic. Okay, thanks very much everybody. Let's hold it there. And next week I think we're going to do Elvis, if I'm right.

- [Moderator] Great, do you have time for questions, David?

- [David] Yeah, sure, thanks.

Q & A and Comments

Debbie, "I saw 'Yorktown Heights' on Broadway. It was brilliant. Wonderful actors but always loved 'The Odd Couple.'"

That's great.

David, "What became of his brother?"

Good question, I'll find out, David.

Ron, "As a native of Manhattan I saw many of these early plays, including 'The Odd Couple.' Art Carney was a natural comic genius whose Felix performance on stage was much funnier and more original than the Harvard-educated Jack Lemmon. Lemmon's mannerisms were stereotyped much more."

Interesting. I didn't see the Art Carney, but interesting what you're saying.

Sonya, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard."

Absolutely.

Q - Gita, "Are there any worthy inheritors of his legacy today?"
A - That's a very interesting question. We'd need to look at so many of the other great comedy writers and actors, the much more recent ones.

Q - Karen, "Could you comment on Simon's relationship with, or view of Groucho Marx? In many way they were opposites. Groucho created characters who were in many ways caricatures. Simon created characters with characteristics common to us all."
A - Karen, I think you hit the nail on the head when you say that Simon creates characters who have characteristics common to us all, whereas Groucho is working with a much more physicalized and caricature. So the irony is more in the physicality and the caricature of what Groucho is doing.

Barry, "It sounds like Seinfeld and Larry David were influenced."

Absolutely. And I don't know if his parents knew of his great success, it's a really interesting question Barry, but certainly Seinfeld and Larry David, absolutely. I mean Seinfeld is absolutely, you know, the sort of straight fall guy and Larry David the obsessive neurotic. In fact that's a classic comedy structure by the way. We have the fall

guy and then one is obsessive in some way. Maybe neurotic or other ways.

Barbara, thank you, thank you, appreciate it. It is a joy to watch. And yeah, it just reminds us, this is over 50 years ago, just how good the writing is, and these actors were.

Porter, "The banter is so much like the Sunshine Boys."

Exactly, and you know, it's one thing to write banter, it's another thing to craft the words in the dialogue, as a writer, so that it works. You know the great phrase again is "Theatre's not about imitating real life, it's about making the stage live."

"You mentioned the critic John Lahr. His father was a great comedian."

Yeah, vaudevillian, Burt Lahr, great, thank you.

Myrna, thank you, I know. You know we're watching this so many, but it's still funny. And if you get a chance, you know, you can see online on YouTube. There are a lot of these clips from the movie they made 30 years later, and obviously "The Odd Couple."

Ron, "Simon's play and later "Laughter on 23rd Floor."

Yeah that was a tribute to the Sid Caesar days of the 1950s, exactly. And it's one of his plays I really like because it's an absolute tribute to Sid Caesar, and Woody Allen, and the others, and Mel Brooks, you know, and the others. Carl Reiner, you know, working together. "Laughter on the 23rd Floor," yep.

Monty, "Walter Matthau had a great sense of humour. His jokes are classic." And his way of telling the jokes.

"Recommend the movie "Charley Varrick." Yep, great fun, thank you.

Ron, "I had the great good fortune to spend time with Walter Matthau when I was friends with his stepdaughter. He wood have dinner with us."

Fantastic. "And his wife would come home from playing in "A Shot in the Dark," which he won his first Tony opposite Julie Harris. Very thoughtful, welcoming man."

Really interesting, fantastic, thank you. Susan thanks. Hannah, yeah, I know, it's just so funny watching these clips again.

Gloria, great, thanks. Patricia, thank you, "Needed to laugh out loud." Yeah, I think we all do.

Rhonda, "He nailed the sinus conditions so well." Exactly, "And the footprints on the floor is something I and my family can related to. Could you hear the laughter from Toronto?"

I can hear the laughter echoing somehow. I don't know about through this little laptop, but you know, it's echoing. Thank you.

Q – Diana, "Did Walter Matthau do Yiddish theatre?"
A – Interesting, I don't think he did. I think as far as I have researched and read, he would go and watch as a young kid in the way that Neil Simon, I think, went to what the great early comedy movies.

Lorna, thank you. Marion, "Walter Matthau is unique." Absolutely.

Thank you, Kay, Wendy, and hosts, and everybody for participating.

All right, well thanks so much everybody for sharing today and take care. Have a wonderful rest of Sunday and hope your week goes well.