NOVEMBER 16 - DECEMBER 18
by Neil Simon
directed by Marc Masterson

PLAY GUIDE

BAREFOOT in the PARK
ABOUT THE BAREFOOT IN THE PARK PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to enduring understandings of the play’s meaning and relevance. Inside you will find:

• Contextual and historical information including a list of characters, plot synopsis and information about the playwright.
• Evocative, thought provoking articles on topics surrounding the play, which are meant to incite conversation and analysis.
• Bridgework activities connecting themes and ideas from the play to your curriculum.
• Oral discussion and writing prompts encouraging your students to draw connections between the play and their own lives. These prompts can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives.

We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way that best fits the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org/education_guides.htm. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshop, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

Barefoot in the Park student matinees and study guides address specific EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

• Students will identify or describe the use of elements of drama in dramatic works.
• Students will identify or explain how drama/theatre fulfills a variety of purposes.
• Students will identify a variety of creative dramatics.
SYNOPSIS

Newlyweds Paul and Corie Bratter move into a small apartment in New York City after their six-day honeymoon. While Paul tries to prove himself as a young lawyer in the courtroom, Corie not only sets up their place, she also sets up her anxious mother with their peculiar (or in Paul’s opinion—crazy) neighbor, Mr. Velasco! After all, this is a guy who sleeps on a rug instead of a bed and enjoys some pretty bizarre culinary concoctions (eel knichi—gross!). Corie’s efforts to have fun and spice up Ms. Banks’ life take the four on a wild adventure all over New York City. Conventional Paul and free-spirited Corie always knew that they were different, but after a strange night out and the events that follow, they begin to wonder if maybe they are too different for one another. The honeymoon might be over, but these two young adults (and the older folks too) still have plenty to learn about themselves and the realities and compromises that come with being in a relationship.

- Tara Duffy

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CORIE BRATTER
A carefree young newlywed, busily trying to set up and decorate the new home she shares with her husband, Paul.

PAUL BRATTER
Corie’s husband, a young lawyer with a dry wit who likes to stay in his comfort zone.

MS. ETHEL BANKS
Corie’s cautious mother who is willing to endure anything for her daughter, even a strange escapade around New York City.

MR. VICTOR VELASCO
The Bratters’ eccentric, bohemian neighbor who lives in the attic of the brownstone, just above their apartment.

TELEPHONE MAN
A good-humored man who makes observations on everyday life and relationships as he installs and fixes telephones.

DELIVERY MAN
An older man who brings wedding gifts sent to the Bratters—and is exhausted by all the flights of stairs leading up to the apartment.

SETTING

PLACE The small top-floor apartment of a brownstone on East 48th Street in New York City.

TIME The early 1960s.

CORIE: Yes, it’s five flights. If you don’t count the front stoop.

TELEPHONE MAN: I counted the front stoop.

Act I, Scene 1
Neil Simon is widely considered one of the most successful playwrights in American history. In his long and prolific career, he has become an icon of film and theatre with his distinctive combination of humor and humanity.

Simon was born to a Jewish-American family in 1927 in the Bronx, New York City. His father, a garment salesman, struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression. After a brief stint in the military, the young Simon teamed up with his brother Danny to pursue comedy writing in radio and television in 1948.

They got their first break writing for the television comedy Your Show of Shows under the actor and writer Sid Caesar. Over the next few years, Caesar put together writing teams that would make any comedy lover giddy: along with the Simons, his writers included Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Larry Gelbart, and Woody Allen. “I knew when I walked into Your Show of Shows,” recalled Simon, “that this was the most talented group of writers that up until that time had ever been assembled.”

The experience was formative for Simon (in fact, it would serve as the inspiration for his play Laughter on the 23rd Floor), and provides a fascinating snapshot of the guys who would go on to define American comedy in the second half of the 20th century. Like Brooks and Allen, Simon’s writing reflects his roots as a Jewish-American kid growing up in New York City. All three were sophisticated, sarcastic, and ably balanced slapstick and farce with real insight. But in addition, Simon’s plays also capture an inclusive American experience. For him, New York seems to be a microcosm for the country as it evolved; the city was bustling with a diverse population of recent immigrants and represented the frontier of America’s changing cultural landscape.

In the 1960s, Simon began writing for the stage. He scored a hit in 1961 with his debut, Come Blow Your Horn, which ran for 678 performances. In 1966, he made history when he had four plays running simultaneously on Broadway: Sweet Charity, The Star-Spangled Girl, The Odd Couple, and Barefoot in the Park (which played for 1,530 performances). In the years that followed, he would go on to write iconic plays and films, earning four Oscar nominations, twelve Tony nominations, and two Tony wins for best play with Biloxi Blues in 1985 and Lost in Yonkers in 1991. Simon’s work has shifted over the course of his career, starting with broad comedy but becoming more serious-minded and reflective with time. Lost in Yonkers stands out as the masterpiece of his late work. Both funny and deeply sad, it shows the devastating effect of an abusive mother on her grown children. In addition to the Tony, the play won Simon the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Today, Simon is still writing new plays, even as his early work continues to be revived around the country. His writing has been wildly successful, and is still resonant, due to his delicate balance of comedy, sentiment and insight. “I used to ask myself: What is a humorous situation?” Simon once said. “Now I ask: What is a sad situation and how can I tell it humorously?” In finding humor in his characters’ troubles, he redeems what is sad and messy about their—and by extension, our—lives.

- Alex Connolly
“Do you know we have some of the greatest weirdos in the country living right here, in this house?” Paul says to Corie early on in *Barefoot in the Park*. He is referring to the eclectic mix of residents that inhabit their new apartment building. These are unfamiliar surroundings for the newlyweds. Paul and Corie go from their honeymoon at The Plaza Hotel – the epitome of high class luxury – to a cramped apartment in one of New York’s edgy, emerging neighborhoods at a time when the culture of the city was in a state of transition: the city was an epicenter of the revolutions of the 1960s that would permanently change American culture. Nowhere was this change more visible than in Greenwich Village, where Corie first takes her shoes off and walks barefoot through Washington Square Park. “The Village” has been known throughout the 20th century as the heartland of Bohemianism, and whose impact on American culture – as captured by *Barefoot in the Park* – has been and continues to be profound.

Back around the 1870s, the landscape of Greenwich Village began changing at an accelerated pace as wealthy New Yorkers started to move north and waves of immigrants took their place, bringing with them a rise of commercial industry and a radically new, dynamic culture. Immigration continued to bring in more diversity and development over the years that followed, and by the early 20th century, The Village emerged as an enclave for artists and radicals who were attracted to its low rents and reputation for nonconformity. Off-Broadway theaters popped up, galleries provided venues for new American art, and coffee houses became buzzing meeting grounds for creative young minds.

Amid this frenzy, the American Bohemian movement emerged. Bohemianism is tricky to define, but its impact is visible everywhere in our lives today. Bohemians advocated “the liberated self,” a new social order in which everyone could be themselves, free from oppressive cultural norms. In Greenwich Village, Bohemians have been on the vanguard of progressive politics. In the early 20th century, they fought for increased access to birth control and advocated for social justice through labor reform and revolution. Later on, Bohemianism would be associated with the beat movement of the 1950s and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s, including the anti-war, feminist and civil rights movements.

Of course, all of this activity gained a lot of attention. The Village was home to some of the century’s most famous artists, from playwright Eugene O’Neill to poet Dylan Thomas to music legend Bob Dylan. As early as the 1910s, tourists were attracted to its noted arts scene and notorious counterculture. In the 1960s, wealthier New Yorkers began moving in, bringing on a wave of gentrification that sent real estate prices soaring. Many of the Bohemians who found a haven there were forced to move elsewhere, and today, The Village hardly resembles its unconventional, revolutionary past.

By pitting the well-to-do culture of Paul and Corie’s mother against the new bohemian radicalism of Victor Velasco, *Barefoot in the Park* captures – or, rather, caricatures – the precise moment in New York history in 1963 when old and new social orders were colliding. The foibles and friction that ensue are not just the source of one-liners, but also show how the Bohemian movement permanently changed American culture. Thanks to the influence of Bohemians in the village and throughout New York, Paul, like America at large, would learn to relax, open his mind, and every once in awhile, go barefoot in the park.

- Alex Connolly
WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT?

Theatre critic John Lahr once said that “comedy is often relegated to the kids’ table of American theatre” because it doesn’t get all the awards and accolades that its brother, serious drama, receives. While comedy might not have a mantle stacked with little golden statues, and it might occasionally throw around mashed potatoes when the other genres aren’t looking, that doesn’t mean it’s any less complex than drama. There are as many theories about how comedy makes us laugh as there are streets in the Big Apple, and there are as many sub-genres of comedy as there are stairs up to the Bratters’ apartment. Let’s break down what exactly makes us laugh in Neil Simon’s *Barefoot in the Park*.

PHYSICAL HUMOR

Even before people can talk, they laugh. Babies, strange creatures that cannot yet say a word or constantly update a Facebook status, will laugh at funny faces like an adult making a cross-eyed, puckering expression. Even supposedly more mature people chuckle at slapstick. In *Barefoot in the Park*, the apartment building itself creates moments of physical comedy. People are wheezing after climbing the five flights of stairs (six if you count the front stoop). The bedroom is so small that the bed barely fits and the couple has to climb over it just to get to the closet.

MISUNDERSTANDING

Audiences like being smarter than the characters. When we know something the characters don’t, we laugh at what these clueless people think is happening. Dramatic irony, the term for when the audience knows information that one of the characters does not, isn’t just for Shakespearean tragedy. It happens in *Barefoot* when Paul stops mid-sentence as he walks in to see his wife in the arms of a strange Bohemian man. The audience laughs because they saw what Paul didn’t—that Mr. Velasco is just giving Corie a boost so she can reach a knob that’s out of reach. It’s a classic “Wait-This-Isn’t-What-It-Looks-Like” moment.

REPEITION

Comedy follows the same directions found on a shampoo bottle, minus the “lather and rinse” parts. The running gag in *Barefoot* (and this article) is all those stairs you have to climb to get to Corie and Paul’s apartment, and exactly how many they are (five flights—or is it six?). The audience becomes familiar with the joke and starts to anticipate its appearance. Once again, we like feeling smart.

WORD PLAY

English is weird. After all, “enough” rhymes with “huff” but not with “cough.” Also, people are strange—they often say what they do not mean. Shocking, we know. For example, Corie assures her mother that the kitchen is big enough to make “spaghetti and things.” Ms. Banks asks “What ‘things’?” and her daughter sarcastically responds that she makes a dish called “things.”

RECOGNITION

Most successful comic characters, despite their eccentricities, have some basis in reality. While most of Will Ferrell’s roles have a very loose connection to the real world, Neil Simon’s characters, while a bit exaggerated, are all very plausible. We all know people that play it by the book like Paul, and others who just throw the book out the fifth story window like Corie (is it the sixth story?). We recognize people from our own lives, and even ourselves, in the characters onstage. We identify with their conflicts too, because audience members also face the dilemma of how to live their lives, as Corie and Paul try to figure out how to make a life together.

Edythe McGovern, a Simon scholar, thinks that Neil Simon’s comedies, despite the dated references to rotary phones and pocketbooks, have lasted so long because the characters are so clearly defined and we can easily relate to them. At the end of the day, Simon includes plenty of comic techniques in his play, but the subject matter—just how funny and strange people can be—is at the root of all the laughs.

- Tara Duffy
THAT’S SEW YOU!
AN INTERVIEW WITH LORRAINE VENBERG

As the Resident Costume Designer for Actors Theatre of Louisville, Lorraine Venberg has dressed plenty of productions, and is currently working on Barefoot in the Park. She recently answered questions about what exactly it takes to clothe an entire cast from head to toe. Heads up—it’s more than just sewing quickly, and research is not just something you do for term papers. Find out how costumes help define time, place and characters in Neil Simon’s comedy.

Where do you begin when designing costumes for a production?

The first step is, obviously, reading the play. I like to read the play for enjoyment the first time, and then read it again to look for any costume information. Then I start researching the era of the production. Barefoot in the Park takes place in the early 1960s, and it’s in New York City, not the middle of Nebraska. It’s not like they’re all walking out of Vogue magazine, they’re still real people, but there is a different level of style for people living in New York.

How do you research what people wore more than forty years ago?

The Internet, of course, is great. For the delivery man, I might try to look up old newspaper ads that have happy delivery men from Macy’s or such. I used to spend a lot of hours in libraries and photo collections. The Internet makes it very easy, but it’s still a search. It’s not like you can type in “New York City Department Store Delivery Man 1964,” and have something come up. You still have to do some searching, and make sure the source is reliable.

How do you turn all that information and images into tangible garments that people can wear?

After I gather all that information, I start doing drawings. I tend to do just pencil drawings to begin with and then go to the director and talk about the drawings and make revisions. Then I create color renderings. Then we either make or buy the clothes. With Barefoot, you often can find 1960s clothes in vintage stores or on eBay. But if you are walking into a vintage store, you just pray, because you can find the perfect suit but it might be the wrong size. Sometimes I will still purchase the garment so someone in the costume shop can copy the pattern into the right size. Then we shop for fabrics for the pieces we need to construct, and for shoes and accessories—everything for the complete look of a character. If it’s a purchased garment, we have fittings with the actors and then alterations. If we have to build something from scratch, we make it in muslin first, and then have the actors come in for fittings. We do all the adjustments on the mock-up before we cut into the expensive fabric. And then the costumes are ready for the show.

So other than making sure no one is naked onstage, why are costumes important? How do they help to tell the story of the play?

Through the style lines, colors and fabrics, we can highlight the different personalities of these characters. Paul’s a lawyer, and lawyers almost always have the uniform of the conservative suit and tie. He’s not going to be wearing some wacky 1960s thing, like a bold scarf. But then there is Victor, the guy living upstairs, who is wacky. Maybe he’s the one wearing the colorful scarf and bright pants. How these characters dress reinforces the differences in their personalities.

- Tara Duffy
**The Geography of Barefoot in the Park**

**New Jersey** This state borders New York City to the east and south. Although it’s known for its large Italian-American population and is often stereotyped as highly industrial, New Jersey is a diverse state that includes affluent suburbs to the east of Manhattan, where Corie’s mother lives.

**Manhattan** The borough that Corie and Paul call home and one of the largest cultural, commercial and financial centers in the world. Many iconic skyscrapers in the area house international corporations. Wall Street, the financial heartbeat of the global economy, is in lower Manhattan, while further north in Midtown Manhattan resides the United Nations Headquarters. The newlyweds live in a section of Midtown where young professionals and eccentric artists meet.

**Westchester** Ethel Banks, Corie’s mother, has lunch in this New York county known for its wealthy suburbs north of the Bronx, the northernmost borough of New York City. Afterwards, she stops by Corie and Paul’s apartment, claiming it was just on her way back home to New Jersey. Seems like she’s taking a rather long way back, doesn’t it?

**Queens** Thanks to the highway layout, Ethel must pass through this borough when she checks in on the newlyweds. Known for its numerous immigrant neighborhoods, Queens was home to large Italian, Irish, Greek, Latino and South Asian populations, and is the easternmost borough of New York City, located on Long Island.

**Staten Island** This southernmost borough of New York City is also its most suburban and least populated—a quarter of a million people during the 1960s. To get there from Manhattan you either have to take a half-hour ferry trip across Upper New York Bay or travel to Brooklyn, the borough southeast of Manhattan, and then drive across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge—and considering New York traffic, that might take a while!

- Tara Duffy
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW

1. Do you really think that opposites attract in romantic and platonic relationships? Why or why not?

2. Have you ever been caught in the middle of a couple or two friends having a fight? Were you uncomfortable? Did you think that just one person was in the wrong, or both? Did you try to offer advice or did you pretend like nothing was going on? Why?

3. Have you ever had a friend who doesn’t think things through? What about a friend who thinks too much and over-analyzes everything? Where do you think you fall in the spectrum?

POST-SHOW

1. Barefoot in the Park is set in the early 1960s. Do you think there are any parts of the play that are dated? What remains the same in 2010? Would you contemporize the play if given the chance, or keep it set in that era? If so, how? And if not, why not?

2. You saw Barefoot in the Park performed in the Bingham Theatre—a theatre in the round. What are some of the challenges of this type of set up? How did this production overcome these obstacles?

3. Barefoot in the Park is largely about the marriage of Corie and Paul. What are some of the ways the characters portrayed their affection for each other? Their displeasure? How is that different from the way they interacted with the other characters of the play? Think specifically about what the actors physically did to act like young newlyweds.
**Music**

Music is not only indicative of a certain time period, it’s also a way that people define themselves. Research songs that were popular in the first half of the 1960s and then create a playlist for one of the characters. Write a paragraph explaining why you think your character, whether it’s Paul or Mr. Velasco, would enjoy listening to these tunes.

**Art**

Greenwich Village, where *Barefoot in the Park* is located, was and still is the home for many renowned (albeit eccentric) artists. Research artists who have lived in the Village and create a slideshow or poster that features photos of their works and explanations of how their pieces changed the art world. Which characters in *Barefoot* would like which piece of art? Do you think any of the works would fit in at the Bratters’ apartment?

**History**

There were a lot of transformative events happening in New York City just before and during the time that *Barefoot in the Park* takes place, moments that would forever shape the city. Research and create a timeline of some major events in New York City history, starting from the end of War World II to 1965. How did the city, and even the entire country, change as a result of these events? Do you see any evidence of these events in *Barefoot*?
In *Barefoot*, many of the characters have to step outside of their comfort zones. Write a personal narrative about a time a friend or mentor pushed you out of your routine. Describe the circumstances. Were you willing to go with the flow or did you resist it? In retrospect, are you glad you put yourself out there, or do you regret it? What did you learn from the whole experience?

**LITERARY**

*Barefoot in the Park* is set in New York City, and mentions various neighborhoods, streets, parks and landmarks in the Big Apple. Write a short story where characters have to travel from one end of New York City to the opposite end—just like what happened when Mr. Velasco takes the Bratters and Mother out to Staten Island. The short story should feature neighborhoods, streets, and attractions, although they can be different from the ones used in *Barefoot*. It is up to you to create the characters and the reason why they have to go across town!

**TRANSACTIVE**

Write a review of the performance of *Barefoot in the Park* that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Describe what it was like to watch the play, but be sure to write more than just the plot of the play. Think about how the play tells the story. Make the experience come alive for the reader by using lots of sensory details when writing about several of the play’s elements, like the costumes, lights, props, music, how the actors said their lines, and how the director realized the vision of the play. Let the audience decide for themselves if the play is worth seeing.


**IF YOU LIKED BAREFOOT IN THE PARK...**

**PLAYS**

*The Odd Couple* by Neil Simon

*Brighton Beach Memoirs* by Neil Simon

*The Producers* by Mel Brooks and Thomas Meehan

**BOOKS**

*Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture* by Rick Beard, Leslie Berlowitz, and the Museum of the City of New York

*New York: An Illustrated History* by Ric Burns, James Sanders, and Lisa Ades

*The 1960s* by Edward J. Reilly


**FILM**

*Barefoot in the Park* (1967) dir. Gene Saks

*Murder by Death* (1976) written by Neil Simon


**TV**

*Mad Men*, AMC, Sundays at 10 PM