

## Why LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR?

by David Ceccarini

**Twenty-one years ago,** as we were preparing our staged reading of Neil Simon's *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR*, I was introduced to the singular and colossal comedic genius, Sid Caesar. Simon was a rookie writer for Caesar in 1953, and his play is a loving tribute to the craziest writers' room in television. I had some vague notion of who Sid Caesar was and that he did a 90-minute live comedy broadcast, *Your Show of Shows*, back in early TV. But the immersion course of specific study, as often happens in our business, brought Isaac Sidney Caesar into full focus, context and prominence within the pioneering world of television in the 1950s.

And as I have come to know him a bit better, I've fallen under his spell. Also, somehow, I felt as if I had met this man before.

### CLOSE TO HOME

My dad, Harry Ceccarini, was educated as an engineer but a part of him retained a love for creative theatrical expression: singing, storytelling, voices and mimicry. When at his best, he enjoyed telling a good joke or story. The ones he told most required accents. And I think the accent he liked best was German. He loved the "shpitzes" and "dumkopfs" and that one crazy fighter plane punch-line that made no sense in German: "Fokkers? Ya, dem



fokkers vas Messerschmitts!" I can remember us watching the 60s TV comedy *Hogan's Heroes*, with wonderful actors John Banner and Werner Klemperer taking it on the chin for the Luftwaffe. Harry also loved to play the German, French, Irish or British DJ, making cassette recordings for my two sisters, Linda at UW-Madison and Lois at U. of Iowa.

Learning more about Caesar, it finally made sense: my dad must have taken great pleasure and inspiration from Sid Caesar and those early days of miraculous 1950s television. My mom backs me up on this theory, as far as saying, "Oh yes, we watched *Your Show of Shows* religiously on Saturday nights." Dad and Sid even shared the same birth year, 1922. So, here was a really funny guy on a brilliant comedy show, same age, similar look, doing things that Harry Ceccarini enjoyed doing naturally, in his own world. You might say that my connection to Sid Caesar was almost hereditary.

### HE COULD DO ANYTHING

Sid Caesar was a tall, strapping, rubber-faced acting powerhouse whose bottomless comedic invention found expression through fluid movement and superb vocal acrobatics. Sifting through the many video recordings of *Your Show of Shows* or *Caesar's Hour*, the breadth and depth of his creative talents are simply astonishing. Though his natural Brooklyn accent colored many of Caesar's characterizations, he was also a master of other accents, including the utterance of approximate foreign languages known as double talk. French, German, Italian, Russian, Japanese: he could carry on in the veneer of most any foreign language, adding in an occasional English word, phrase or reference for the punch-line.

Though Caesar was the franchise talent on the *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar's Hour* teams, he was by no means a one-man band. Producer Max Liebman

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*LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* is generously sponsored by  
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understood that Sid needed good writers and acting colleagues to supercharge his innovative skills and bring to life their collective ideas of what live TV comedy could be. Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner and Howie Morris formed the tight-knit troupe who could support Sid in all the crazy sketches churned out from the writers' room.

**DREAM TEAM**

And what writers! Mel Brooks, Neil and brother Danny Simon, Larry Gelbart, Mel Tolkin, Woody Allen, Selma Diamond (all would have great writing careers), Reiner and Caesar too: they formed a fiercely competitive, highly-pressurized comedy laboratory that produced 90 minutes of live material every week, for seven seasons. They wrote smart comedy, long sketches that could incorporate cliché and bombast along with subtlety and wit, always with an eye toward what Mel Tolkin called, "the human condition." They competed with and against each other for their sketch ideas, for Caesar's favor, for status in the room; but mostly, they competed together to do the best show possible, week in and week out. Above the fray, they were one crazy, comedy family.

Despite his tremendous talents and on-screen celebrity, Sid Caesar remained a humble, generous and grateful man who appreciated his colleagues, their talents, and their contributions to the work.

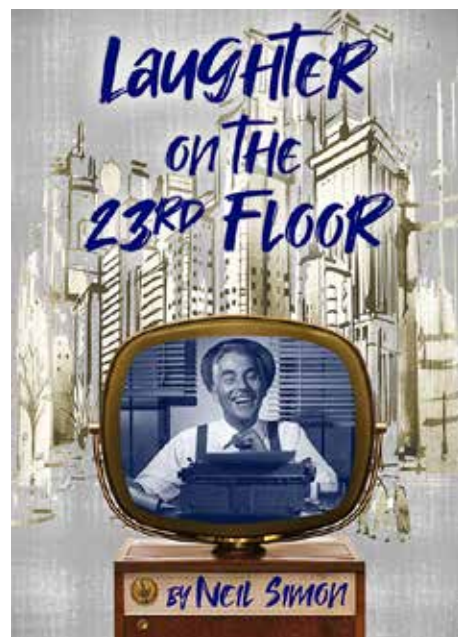
He understood that his writers gave him an infinite array of platforms from which to launch brilliant journeys into unexplored comedic territory – they were his life blood.

**IT'S ABOUT THE PEOPLE**

Neil Simon's *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* is a celebration of this family of comedic crazies, as remembered from his very junior position in the writers' room at NBC in the early 1950s. We catch them at a critical time, as TV tastes (according to the corporate big shots) are changing, and pressure is applied from on high to dilute their exquisite zaniness to run-of-the-mill humor that the "whole country" can understand. Through these trials, Simon's Sid Caesar stand-in, Max Prince, stands up for the show and his team, to fight for what they all believe is good, and right. It's a noble struggle, firmly rooted in the human condition, which is why Simon's play is both very funny and deeply touching. And that's why *LAUGHTER* has made it once again to the Next Act stage.

I'm pretty sure it's a play that Harry Ceasarini would enjoy. I'm hoping you will too.

See you at the theatre.



| LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR by Neil Simon |   |                 |                         |                       |                       |                         |
|--|---|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| NOVEMBER 21 - DECEMBER 15, 2019          |   |                 |                         |                       |                       |                         |
| SUNDAY                                   | MONDAY  | TUESDAY         | WEDNESDAY               | THURSDAY              | FRIDAY                | SATURDAY                |
|  |   |                 |                         | 21<br>Preview<br>7:30 | 22<br>Opening<br>7:30 | 23<br>4:30<br>8:00<br>P |
| 24<br>2:00<br>T                          |   | 26<br>7:30<br>T | 27<br>1:30<br>7:30<br>P | Thanksgiving          | 29<br>7:30            | 30<br>4:30<br>8:00      |
| 1<br>2:00<br>PT                          |   |                 | 4<br>1:30<br>7:30       | 5<br>7:30<br>PT       | 6<br>7:30             | 7<br>4:30<br>8:00       |
| 8<br>2:00<br>PT                          | 9<br>7:30<br>S  |                 | 11<br>7:30              | 12<br>7:30<br>T       | 13<br>7:30<br>P       | 14<br>4:30<br>8:00      |
| 15<br>2:00<br>P                          | Personal Preview (Begins 30 minutes prior to curtain) |                 |                         |                       |                       |                         |
|  | T Talkback  |                 | S Pay What You Can      |                       |                       |                         |

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**Who Will Buy This Wonderful Feeling?**

by Jane Flieller

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**Consider a tax-deductible donation in any amount.** As a 501(c)3 nonprofit arts organization, Next Act Theatre relies on the generosity of our patrons, foundations, and sponsors as ticket sales only cover about half the cost of producing great live theatre. Every penny counts, but did you know that \$1,000 or more puts you right in the heart of our Producer's Circle, earning you rewards like a special invitation to an annual reception and sneak peek of the fall show!

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**Come to a show!** Nothing supports us more than our audience. We're committed to bringing you the best in compelling theatre produced in an intimate setting, featuring the best of local, professional talent. Plays are chosen with the intent to stimulate thought, foster the exchange of ideas and promote new perspectives and understanding. Come for a Personal Preview or stay for a Talkback. Enjoy a delicious beverage from our full-service bar and take in the various visual arts exhibits in the lobby. And bring a friend!

Happy Holidays from all of us at Next Act Theatre. We wish you a peaceful and productive 2020.

**Join the Clean Plate Club!**

Next Act Theatre is teaming up with the Hunger Task Force this holiday season, and we need your help!

The Hunger Task Force tells us they are in need of certain items this year, so here's what you can do:

When you come down to Next Act to see *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR*, we encourage you to bring a couple cans of **low-sodium vegetables** for our food drive. Our goal is to gather 300 pounds of canned vegetables to help feed families in need. **Be sure these items aren't expired** so we can use them to put a smile on the faces of hungry folks!

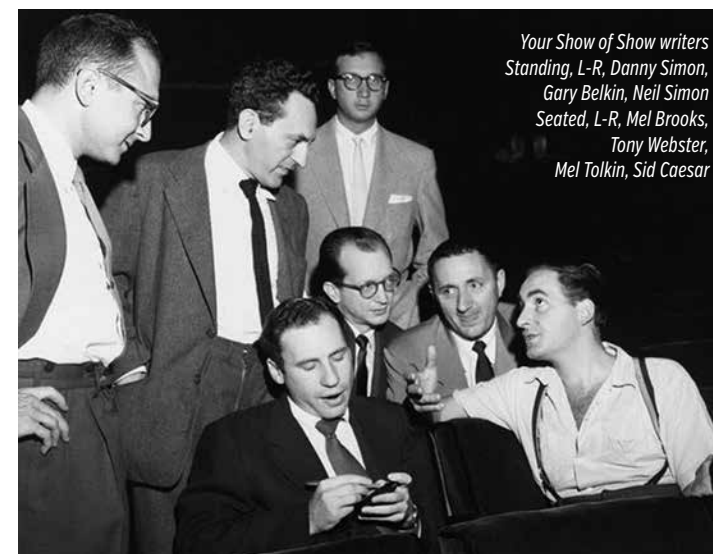
Any questions? Call Jane at 414-278-7780 or email [jane@nextact.org](mailto:jane@nextact.org). Thank you for your help!



**It was the early 50s.** The Cold War was gaining in intensity. People were beginning to build personal fallout shelters to withstand the threat of nuclear war. Wisconsin's Senator Joseph McCarthy was intensifying the search for Communists in America. Writers and performers were blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. But on Saturday nights, America tuned in to the phenomenally popular *Your Show of Shows*. America needed laughter, and on Saturday nights, we got what we needed.

The first commercial TV broadcasts began in 1947. Televisions were black and white only, and TV shows were broadcast live. From February 25, 1950, until June 5, 1954, *Your Show of Shows* was a live weekly 90-minute broadcast. Live. Memorized. Performed without cue cards or teleprompters. The show, produced by Max Liebman, featured the stellar comedy team of Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca (who had already proven themselves in Liebman's *Admiral Broadway Revue*) augmented by the mercurial Carl Reiner and puckish Howard Morris. In the few years before *Your Show of Shows*, there were other variety shows, and other comedy sketches performed live on TV, but this monumental series is often credited with the invention of TV comedy. Those of us who viewed the show on Saturday nights will never forget some of the classic routines – The German Professor, Doris & Charlie Hickenlooper, the Cuckoo Clock, whole monologues spoken in fake foreign languages, movie parodies, and other legendary sketches.

And behind all of it were the writers. Liebman, the producer, assembled a team of comic geniuses who met in the celebrated Writers' Room in the NBC-TV office building. Mel Brooks was specifically recruited by Caesar and gained the reputation as the most irritating, but also funniest, guy in the room.



Your Show of Shows writers  
Standing, L-R, Danny Simon,  
Gary Belkin, Neil Simon  
Seated, L-R, Mel Brooks,  
Tony Webster,  
Mel Tolkin, Sid Caesar



Imogene Coca & Sid Caesar

A young Woody Allen, too, wrote for Sid Caesar in Caesar's next project, *Caesar's Hour*. In a writer's world of men, Caesar and Liebman had the vision specifically to include women, Lucille Kallen and Selma Diamond, among the male writers. A young Neil Simon began his career as one of the writers, and later based his 1993 play *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* on the extraordinary experience. The writers' room in the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, written by Carl Reiner, was also based on the *Your Show of Shows* writers' room.

**LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR** is fiction but based on the very real history of the original TV variety show, *Your Show of Shows*. Each of the characters in the play is based on a real writer.

**Lucas Brickman**  
Neil Simon

**Max Prince**  
Sid Caesar

**Kenny Frank**  
Larry Gelbart (and maybe Carl Reiner)

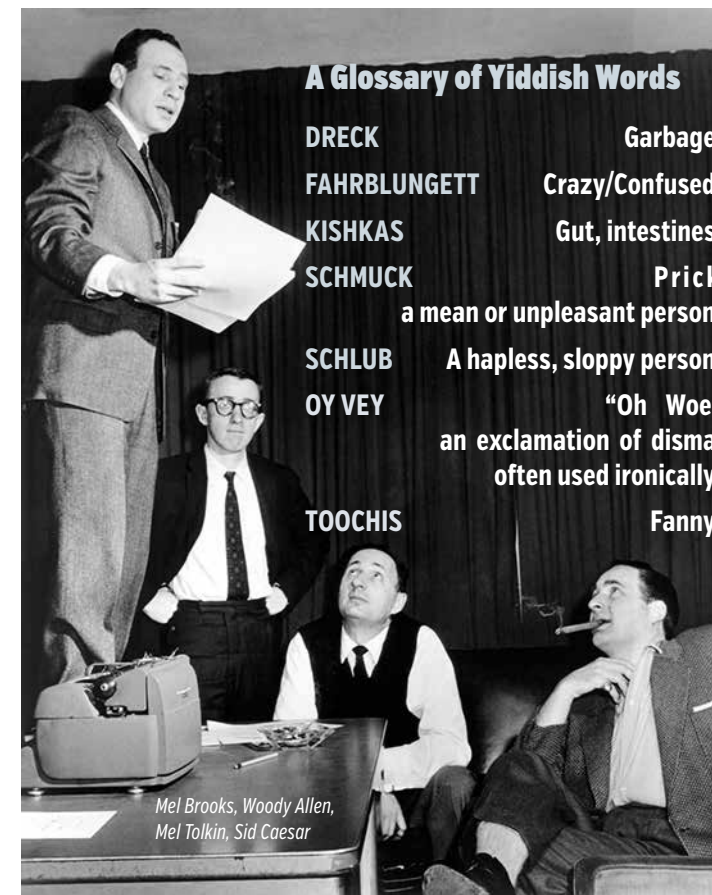
**Val Slotsky**  
Mel Tolkin

**Brian Doyle**  
Tony Webster

**Milt Fields**  
Sheldon Keller

**Carol Wyman**  
Lucille Kallen & Selma Diamond

**Ira Stone**  
Mel Brooks



Mel Brooks, Woody Allen,  
Mel Tolkin, Sid Caesar

## A Glossary of Yiddish Words

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
| DRECK        | Garbage  |
| FAHRBLUNGETT | Crazy/Confused   |
| KISHKAS      | Gut, intestines  |
| SCHMUCK      | Prick,<br>a mean or unpleasant person                          |
| SCHLUB       | A hapless, sloppy person                                       |
| OY VEY       | "Oh Woe,"<br>an exclamation of dismay<br>often used ironically |
| TOOCHIS      | Fanny  |

It's no accident that the writers were almost all Jewish, with the exception of Tony Webster. The show premiered five years after the Holocaust, at a time when the Hollywood Blacklist targeted, among others, Jewish writers and performers. Humor had always been a Jewish tool to combat tragedy and suffering. Even in the concentration camps of the Nazi Regime, Jews told jokes. A famous joke from the period is as follows:

It's a little-known fact, that toward the end of Hitler's power, he consulted a famous fortune teller, wanting to know the exact date when he would die. "Your death," said the fortune teller, "will be on a Jewish holiday." "Which one?" a terrified Hitler asked. The fortune teller replied, "Whatever day you die will be a Jewish holiday!"



Sid Caesar

Almost 40 years after the close of *Your Show of Shows*, Neil Simon, then an established playwright, penned *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* based on his own experience. While not being documentary theatre, the characters are inspired by

the original writers of *Your Show of Shows*. The play even reenacts the creation of the famous parody of the 1953 film version of Shakespeare's *JULIUS CAESAR* starring Marlon Brando as Mark Antony.

**Kenny:** What dost thou seekest in the constellations, Caesar?

**Max:** [Reads, doing Brando.] A clustuh a stahs in da heavens.

**Brian:** And by what name dost this cluster be called, oh, Caesar?

**Max:** It is called Stelluh ... Stelluh! Stulluh for Stahlight! [Max smiles as Max.] That's good. I like that... Good joke, Kenny.

The references in *LAUGHTER* are thinly veiled ones to the real creators of *Your Show of Shows*. And Simon's writing is a tribute to the Jewish writers of early television. The writing is full of Yiddish words and archetypical Jewish irony. The background is the turmoil of the paradoxes of life of the 1950s.



The comedy of *Your Show of Shows*, as it is in the fictional Max Prince Show, is never overtly political. *LAUGHTER*, however, captures the milieu. In a scene in which the Russian-born head of the writing team, Val Slotsky, announces the death of Stalin, he continues:

**Val:** There's more news. The U.S. State Department just announced they have positive proof that Russia has the hydrogen bomb.

**Lucas:** Jesus! That is scary.

**Val:** Tell my children. Because they're the ones who will inherit the devastation the fucking politicians left them.

*LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* captures a moment in history, written by an eye witness. It is a tribute to the pioneering beginnings of broadcast TV and a very funny reenactment of the legendary Writers' Room of *Your Show of Shows*.

This season, Next Act Theatre launched a new arts education initiative that takes Shakespeare directly into schools.

When did you first learn about William Shakespeare? Was it in a high school freshman English class? Did a parent drag you to the theatre, and once your ear was tuned to the language, did you begin to lean forward in your seat? Did someone dump the Complete Works on your desk and tell you to read it? Was the BBC's *Television Shakespeare* on one day in the early '80s?

My goal as a teacher is to give high school students a positive experience with the Bard, one they'll hopefully remember fondly enough to buy a ticket to a play, put a Shakespeare movie on their Netflix cue, or audition for a role at school. We start with what they know - I ask them how or if they've encountered Shakespeare before (some have, some haven't) and what they think about it. The spectrum of experience and opinion is wide and varied - some young people think it's boring and not relatable, some young people think it's exciting and fun.

Then, we put Shakespeare where he belongs in historical context: about a century and a half after the printing press was invented, and only about 50 years before the first colony at Jamestown. We talk about what that means for the English language - Shakespeare's original texts have early modern vocabulary but no grasp yet of grammar or spelling. We talk about how English evolves (and the students attempt to keep me up to date on the new hip lingo - although I'm told nobody says "hip" anymore) and once we feel prepared, we dive into Shakespeare's verse structure, dirty jokes, and colorful characters. We don't just read; we play.

I have secret goals - ones I don't overtly state to the class. It's my belief that studying the language you use daily helps you express yourself better - and there is research that suggests that when you expand your emotional vocabulary, you are literally able to feel those emotions more deeply. Aldous Huxley describes discovering Shakespeare in his book "Brave New World" thusly: "The strange words rolled through his mind; rumbled, like talking thunder ... What did the words exactly mean? He only half knew. But their magic was strong."

It's my hope that I can pass on some of that magic to the next generation. I'm so lucky that Next Act has allowed me to begin my Classroom Shakespeare workshops this year! It is my favorite thing to do, and I hope the program continues to evolve and adapt to student needs - just like the English language.



Shorewood High School students

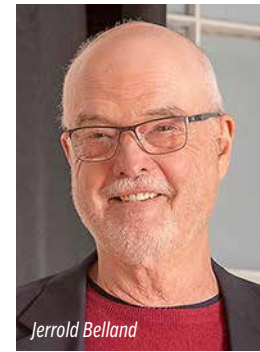
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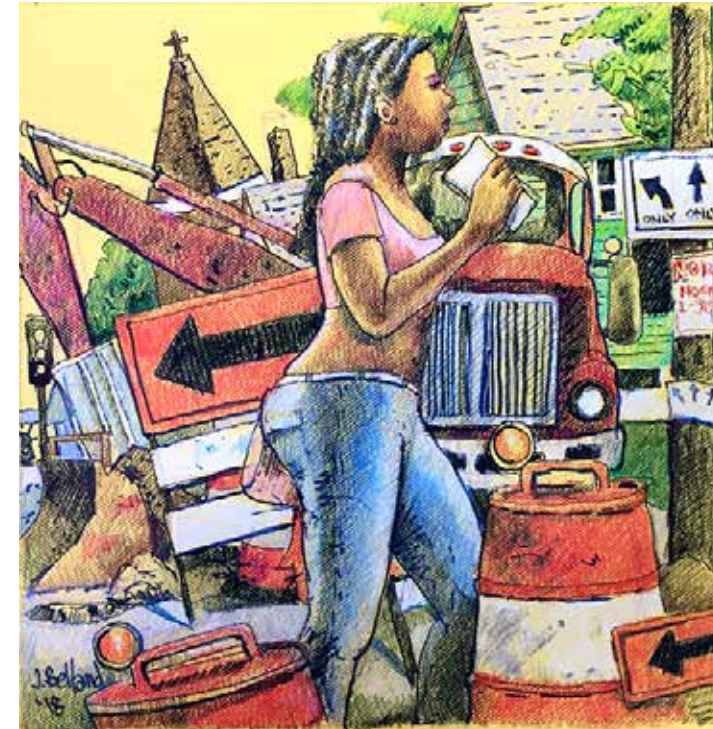
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Jerrold Belland

Artists can be a pretty serious bunch, especially when it comes to their art. Just read a few typical artist's statements and you will see what I mean. Most are heady, academic exercises in expounding deep aesthetic, spiritual and/or social intentions through the use of a vocabulary and syntax rarely seen elsewhere. And then there

is Jerrold Belland, our featured gallery artist for Neil Simon's *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR*:

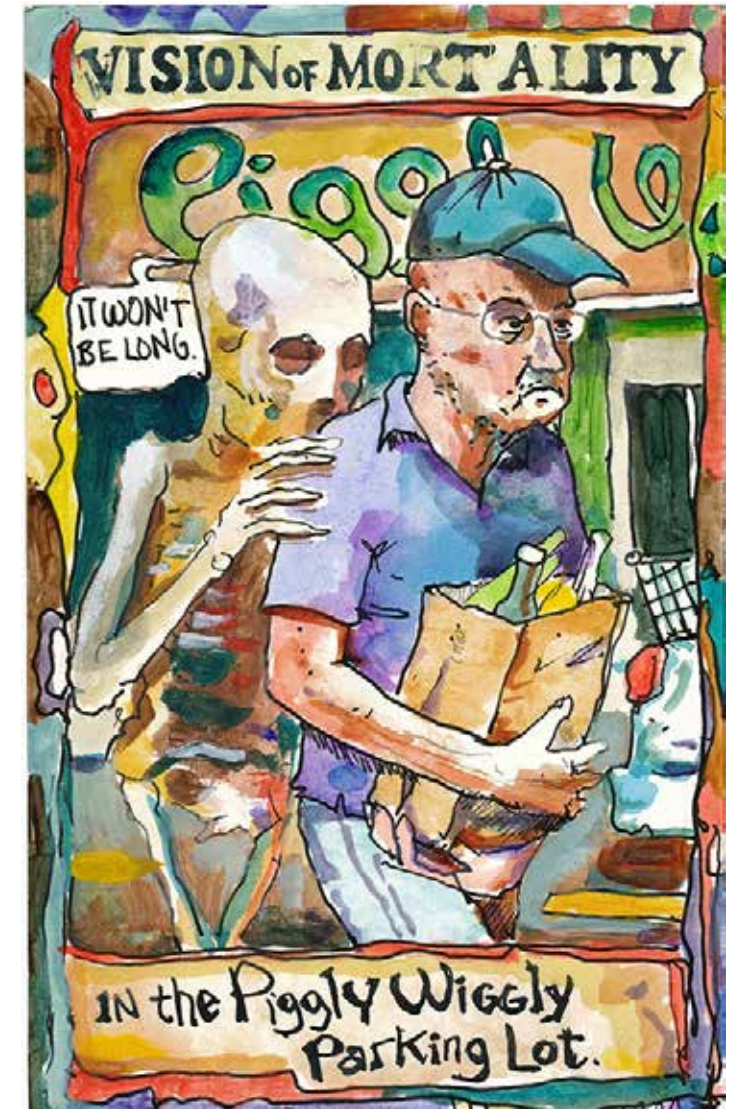


Girl in Roadwork

"Each day, driving to my studio down Memorial Drive, a story unfolds before my eyes like a movie being played out on a screen. I am drawn to stories and I make art that tells stories. It's a long tradition, this business of narrative art, and I'm proud to be part of it. I am told that there is a genuine comic element in my work. I am happy about that. I am happy that I can translate my dark view of the world into something that will make people smile."

What could be simpler or more straight forward? Who could be a better fit for pairing with a play by Neil Simon? I certainly couldn't think of anyone else.

Jerrold (Jerry) Belland was born and raised on a dairy farm near Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. As a graduate of UWM with a master's degree, he has been making art since the early 70s. In his long career, he has won over 100 awards in various art exhibitions, and his work hangs in hundreds of private and public collections. In 2012, he won a Racine Art



Vision of Mortality

Museum fellowship and decided to return to an early passion, cartooning, with a vengeance. In quick succession, he published four books of cartoons. His dark view of politics led to his third book, "Scott Walker in Hell and Other Delights" which was quickly followed by another about the first year of the Trump presidency, "Donald Trump, the First Hundred Years."

We are honored to feature a collection of Jerry's art, representative of his always perceptive, sometimes sardonic, impressions of our everyday world.

Jerry lives with his wife in Mount Pleasant, Wisconsin and maintains a studio in the inner city of Racine. At 70 years old, he still maintains a rigorous studio practice. For more information and examples of his art, visit [jerrybellandart.net](http://jerrybellandart.net)

Jim Toth is a retired art educator, now in his sixth season as Next Act's volunteer gallery curator.



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## Did You Know?

- *Your Show of Shows* was nominated for seven Emmys, winning two.
- The popularity of *Your Show of Shows* is said to have impacted the attendance at Broadway productions on Saturday nights.
- In 2000, 137 of the scripts for *Your Show of Shows* were found in a closet in City Center in New York City. They were put there by producer Max Liebman, and the closet, which had been locked for about 40 years, was painted shut.
- Sid Caesar developed the technique of double-talk while waiting tables in his parents' restaurant.
- Sid Caesar played Coach Calhoun in the movie *Grease* (1978).
- The role of Max Prince in *LAUGHTER ON THE 23RD FLOOR* was originally played by Nathan Lane, followed by Gene Wilder.

The writers for *Your Show of Shows* had successful careers long after the show ended. Some of them were part of the most iconic productions in television and film history.

Larry Gelbart wrote for *M\*A\*S\*H* • Mel Tolkin wrote for *All in the Family* • Tony Webster wrote for *The Love Boat*  
Selma Diamond appeared in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, *Twilight Zone: The Movie* and *Night Court*  
Mel Brooks *The Producers*, *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein* and many, many, many more



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