



Hannah Arendt's Human Condition in Neil Simon's Theater

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Abstract

Neil Simon's plays, through their comic exterior, target serious social critique at the contemporary media-ridden culture of America. This research is a study of Simon's theater from the perspective of Hannah Arendt's speculations on human condition, totalitarianism, and violence. The selected plays, *Fools*, *Lost in Yonkers*, and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* are scrutinized according to the three main concepts in Arendt's thought, which are "action", "work", and "labor." Action is a set of goal-oriented human activities carried out in plurality and imbued with the hope for new possibilities. Plural action is the most effective means of resisting totalitarianism that only wishes to downgrade action to work and then labor through violence. However, despite impositions and enforcements of violence, action always remains in the history for future generations to draw inspiration from. In Simon's theater, despite its nonpolitical and humorous façade, action is inevitably thwarted, but its positive outcomes cannot be plagued. Simon puts on a vivid display the sparkles of pluralism and action regardless of immanent violence and its democratic disguise.

Keywords

Action, Work, Labor, Power, Violence, Totalitarianism

1. Introduction

Neil Simon, Broadway's king of comedy, orchestrates Jewish humor and Chekhovian comedy in his plays. His comedies seethe with the critique of modern life and culture in the late twentieth century America. Being mainly autobiographical, they portray his troubled childhood and different stages of his life as a Jewish New Yorker. Simon asserts that "by focusing on painful aspects of human experience, he ultimately



transcends the pain, arriving at a sense of connection, a feeling of shared community” (Koprince 14). He has written more than thirty plays and has produced the same number of screenplays mostly based on his written works, receiving three Tony awards. His romantic comedies and farces cleave to a plethora of dramatic subjects such as “marital conflict, infidelity, divorce, sibling rivalry, and adolescence”, grappling with the more serious bones of contention like “alcoholism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism” (Koprince 14-15).

Being overshadowed and dwarfed by the *serious* experimentations of his contemporaries such as John Guare, David Mamet, Robert Wilson, and Richard Foreman, Simon’s early plays have been underestimated due to their commercial success and lacerated for their lack of socio-political earnestness. However, his so-called nonpolitical stage can provide a pristine ground for unraveling the dynamo behind society, which is to say, the mechanisms and protocols through which mainstream culture’s immanence and its mythological dispositions are produced and preserved. The crucial point to bear in mind is that Simon captures the poetics of community and communality in his plays and covets for a kind of collective awakening and renaissance to bring about reformation and revision. Such an inclination in his theater calls for a political adjustment and assessment. For that matter, Hannah Arendt’s compartmentalization of human condition under totalitarian capitalism in modern societies can serve as a critical tool for disclosing the political potential in Simon’s early plays, which are *Fools* (1981), *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1993). In this regard, the nexus Arendt creates between politics and ontology, resonating with Michel Foucault’s genealogical and archeological lens and Giorgio Agamben’s perceptopolitics, is one of the most comprehensive and concrete surveys on the nature of sovereignty.

As the analytical framework for excavating Simon’s (dis)enchantment with American-ness and its vectors of production and consumption, Arendt’s postulation regarding formation of political identity is the target of this study. The main Arendtian concepts used in this research to analyze Simon’s plays are “labor”, “work”, “action”, “power”, and “violence”. Such a tapestry of political concepts explicate the condition of being in modern pseudo-democratic societies that have established themselves through a sharp contrast with totalitarianism. Arendt’s contemplations on modern



autocracy of capitalism can help unravel Simon's peculiar stance on the interconnection among community, commodity, and Americanization.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly research on Simon's theater is meager. Bette Mandl in her article, "Beyond Laughter and Forgetting: Echoes of Holocaust in Neil Simon's *Lost in Yonkers*", refers to Simon as a Jewish writer who has tried to highlight Jewishness and its difficulties in this play: "While he may not have used the details of his personal life in *Lost in Yonkers*, Simon did draw directly on his background as a Jewish American" (Konas 69). She contends that the play is a portrayal of those characters who had suffered from the Holocaust due to their Jewishness. Although "the horrors of war [. . .] remains outside of the play" (70), the effects of it have been profoundly depicted in this work. Moreover, similar traces of these themes can be observed in the films and theater which deal with "the large concerns that surround the collective memory of the Shoah" (70). According to Mandl, *Lost in Yonkers* strongly brings to mind the Shoah, but it also depicts its aftermath quite well. He also mentions that Simon's theater is like a kind of psychological landscape where the characters are obliged to deal with their horrors and devise an alternative future by dodging grandma Kurnitz's totalitarian behavior which portrays the renewal of terror-stricken times (69-71).

Koprince, in *Understanding Neil Simon* (2002), refers to *Jake's Women* as an expressionistic work that focuses on the inner world of a middle-aged writer, who strongly depends on the female characters that are related to him, e.g. his sister, his first wife who is dead, his current wife, his daughter, and his psychoanalyst. Furthermore, Koprince claims that via a Pirandellian representation of reality, flashbacks, and imagined conversations, Simon manages to depict Jake as a person who is a workaholic, living in recluse, away from most people in the society. He is a kind of character that contemplates life from different angles, but does not really live it himself. Therefore, the writer mainly focuses on human connection in order to magnify this painful void (133). Koprince further observes that Simon's expressionist manifestations are noticed in the stage directions at the opening of the script, which



show the scenes as a figment of Jake's imagination and simultaneously taking place in reality. His apartment is "minimal" in contrast to his overwhelmed mind which is "overflowing" (*Jake's Women* 159). However, Jake is also reminded of reality because he has to interact with the female figures in his life. Lastly, much of the dramatic performance is presented as happening inside the writer's mind, with no fixed meaning of time and place, fact or fiction (133-4).

In "Simon's *Jake's Women* Is Not Comedy Material", *New York Times*' Theater Reviewer, Leah Frank, reviews Simon's *Jake's Women*. He avidly maintains that Jake's desire for revelation and his self-obsession can be compared to "a three-dimensional pop-psych self-help manual." He also states that *Jake's Women* adequately depicts the human condition which is strongly linked with human memory. The main theme of the play focuses on human suffering whilst confronted with the task of obliterating the past and forgiving the pain of previous difficulties.

Konas in the book, *Neil Simon: A Case Book*, comments on Simon as an "undervalued" playwright that instead of considering his works as artistic literature, most critics regard them as undervalued commercial works. He even cites what Simon once told the "critic David Richards" about his flamboyant play, *Lost in Yonkers* (1992): "I'm telling you now, John Guare is going to win the Pulitzer Prize. Even if my play is successful, I will never win the Pulitzer. There are regional theaters that won't do my work just because I'm Neil Simon" (1). However, to his surprise his play did win the Pulitzer Prize out two months later of the other five options. Douglas Watt, as one of the members of the jury, judges the play "a mature work by an enduring (and often undervalued) American playwright" (1).

3. Theoretical Framework

It is in *The Human Condition* (1958) that Arendt brings to the forefront the malaise of modern life, which is "contemplation" and avidly covets for revitalizing human condition with "action". Harking back to Foucault's archeological view of history and power, her critique of "the *vita contemplativa*" harks back to Plato's denigration of praxis or action in favor of the realm of Ideas. Arendt asserts that such a view of human action and the life it could inspire, "the *vita activa*", should become the locus for politics, reformation, and ethics. Thus she reorients her political map toward the



vita activa of plural praxis and collective activity with three new signposts: “Labor”, “work” and “action”. Labor is “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself” (*The Human Condition* 7). Labor guarantees survival as in the case of not only the slaves “who were coerced by the necessity to stay alive and by the rule of his master, but also the working life of the free craftsman and the acquisitive life of the merchant” (12). Labor does not require partnership or being in the company of others. Whether women’s labor in childbirth or men’s providing nourishment, “natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it” (30). The idea of labor is bound to some perimeters such as “(human) biology, (human) body, (human) metabolism, fertility, [...] dehumanizing processes, devouring processes, painful exhaustion, waste, recyclability, destruction (of nature, body, fertility), and deathlessness” (Dietz 96).

In contrast to labor’s naturalness, work is “the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence. [...] Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all” (*The Human Condition* 7). Work manifests itself in human products and artifacts, “bestow[ing] a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time” (8). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt declares that work and violence always have a bilateral connection with each other. This is because work “must necessarily do violence to nature in order to achieve its products” (97). Work is the beacon of an activity that erects the pillars of a place in which men can come together in order to promote action. Work’s manifestations are as follows: “The man-made world, fabrication, [...] durability, objectivity, building, [...] violation, [...] ends and means, predictability, the exchange market, commercialism, capitalism, instrumental processes, utilitarian processes, [...], destruction (of nature, world), and lifelessness” (Dietz 97). Furthermore, work epitomizes an activity whose doers definitely desire closure. In this respect, although work may pontificate political



activity, “the worker’s view of the world risks turning everything into a means to an end” (Parekh 30).

Arendt adopts “action” from Aristotle’s definition of *praxis* in order to show the old translation of political activity in the communal world. In this sense, Arendt’s political verve can be viewed from an Aristotelian standpoint that affirms “the essence of human being is political” (Parekh 109). Arendt’s politico-ontological conjugations show that humans become political when “stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join” (*The Human Condition* 177). Action as “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter corresponds to the human condition of plurality. [...] While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition of all political life” (7). Arendt describes action as a means for new beginnings, for genesis, believing that this beginning anew starts when a person is born into the world. However, action is always susceptible to being suppressed in the modern totalitarian world.

By juxtaposing labor, work, and action, Arendt argues that labor is a means of “individual survival”, work guarantees “permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time”, and action generates “the condition for remembrance, that is, for history” (*The Human Condition* 8-9). With her genealogical plumb line, she traces the problem of modern politics and subjectivity in the disappearance of ancient city-state and citizenship. Loss of citizenship is the aftermath of subjects’ metamorphosis to “laborers and jobholders” desperately seeking survival and sustenance. The crucial point to bear in mind is that for Arendt labor does not necessarily inculcate belonging to the working class “but only that all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families” (9).

Another main feature of Arendt’s political terminology is her close attention to the idea of “power” and its contrast to “violence”. For Arendt, power is a medium through which political action can take place. In her view, as Dana R. Villa mentions, “political action was viewed as the very opposite of violence, coercion or rule” (12). She posits that with the emergence of violence, power of action and pluralism is undermined and eventually dissipated. She believes that violence creates deep fissures in



political activity and community. This idea is further clarified by her: "Out of a barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect. What never can grow out of it is power" (*On Violence* 53).

In her conjectures on modernity, Arendt approaches modern totalitarianism. She contends that historians have failed to notice the tyranny of new systems of control. In her viewpoint, "the modern masses and their leaders have succeeded [...] in bringing forth in totalitarianism an authentic, albeit all-destructive, new form of government" (*The Human Condition* 216). Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), maintains: "It is in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power" (456). Based on this viewpoint, a totalitarian state demolishes the power of togetherness and unleashes all its violent forces on people's action. Anchored on Arendt's thought on the human condition, this article aims at providing a political reading of Simon's plays; *Fools* (1981), *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* (1993). The collaborative means that are oriented toward plural action are going to be explored as Simon's characters stubbornly try to confront labor and violence.

4. *Fools*: The Possibility of Pluralism and Action

Fools is a comic fable, set in a small village in Ukraine whose inhabitants have been doomed to stupidity for more than two hundred years. Leon Tolchinsky, a teacher, arrives at the village and surprisingly faces its dim-witted and confused people. Now he is also ensnared by the curse: he only has twenty-four hours to educate or marry Sophia to break the evil curse. Otherwise, he will be taken over by the spell. Eventually, Leon falls in love with Sophia and successfully becomes the first person who breaks the curse though many had failed before him. At the end of the play, he and Sophia get married, and the villagers start an ordinary life.

Fools can be read in the vicinity of Arendtian political being and action. Action paves the way in the play through the interruption of routine life and the procession to a new start in the public sphere. Simon depicts Leon's arrival at the village as a new momentum that strongly aims at initiating action by teaching the mindless and eccentric villagers. Snetsky, one of the villagers, reminds Leon of the fact that many



teachers have come before him, but not even one of them was able to last through the first last night: “We are unteachable. We’re all stupid in Kulyenchikov. There isn’t a town or village more stupid in all of Mother Poland” (10). The foolishness consigned to the curse is well exemplified in these lines:

LEON. (*To Snetsky*) I was hired by Dr. Zubritsky to teach his young daughter.

SNETSKY. (*Bursts out laughing.*) Teach her daughter? Impossible. The girl is hopeless. Nineteen years old and she just recently learned to sit down. (11)

While talking of action in *The Human Condition*, Arendt refers to interruption and a new beginning: “If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality [...]. It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life” (246). Breaking the curse can only be accomplished in plurality; social transmutation cannot be achieved singlehandedly. This is “authentic politics” (*The Human Condition* 133). Since all people have this capacity to be called political beings, plurality becomes a condition of action through which people “can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves” (7). Ultimately, even Leon has to disclose his distinct identity within the collective context of the village.

In this regard, according to Arendt in *The Human Condition*, “equality” and “distinction” are the paramount features of plurality:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor planned for their future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough. (195)

Equality and distinctness can be tracked down in the villagers. They believe in their dumbness and act accordingly. In fact, they are all equal in their confusion, and by internalizing foolishness, they all believe in the curse and are thus haunted by it. When Leon decides to go on with the risk of breaking the curse, he realizes that the idea of



being a fool is the product of internalization and indoctrination: “If a parent tells you are a naughty child from the day you were born, you will grow up believing you are a worthless human being. And from the day you were born, you were told you were all stupid” (57). However, they resist it with their individual qualities, their singularities that are embedded in collective action.

At the end of the play, the audience is exposed to each character’s singularity achieved via plural action. As soon as the curse is lifted Leon starts describing jobs being taken up by all the villagers:

LEON. Once the curse was lifted, we became like any other small town or village in any other part of the world, susceptible to all the “ups and downs” of normal life – well the magistrate for example. (*The MAGISTRATE appears.*) After two more years in office, greed got the better part of him, and he was convicted of taking bribes for political favors [...]. (*MISHKIN appears.*) Mishkin gave up the postal service and became a writer [...]. (*YECHNA appears.*) Yechna, a shrewd business woman, put all her money in real estate and now own seventeen houses in Kulyenchikov [...]. (*SLOVITCH appears.*) Slovitch bought four more butcher shops in a village that really needed only one and went bankrupt in a month [...]. (71)

At the end of *Fools*, Leon broaches action as an ephemeral impulse with lasting and lingering impacts. As soon as the curse is broken, all the villagers scatter and set their own style of life. Action’s finitude, yet its immanent presence can be seen in the last line of the play uttered by Leon: “After all, there are so many Kulyenchikov in this world” (72). The play ends with the idea of a fresh start. Leon is the initiator who beckons the fools forward to appear in the public space in order to make a community for breaking the curse. Action terminates phantasmagoria and establishes new bedrock for communality.

5. *Lost in Yonkers*: Totalitarianism and Labor

Lost in Yonkers begins with two teen brothers, Jay and Arty, who are forced to live with their cold-hearted grandmother Kurnitz. Their mother has just passed away due to a severe illness and their father has left them to take up a job as a traveling salesperson to pay off his debts. The entire play pivots around the grandmother’s



tyranny towards her children and grandchildren. In order to release themselves from her confinement, Jay and Arty decide to make money. Bella, their aunt, informs them that Kurnitz has hidden a great amount of money somewhere at her candy store. The boys decide to steal her money; however, during the robbery, they encounter their uncle Louie, a henchman, who has just arrived home. Louie, a street gangster, wants to hide himself in his mother's house for a while. Unlike them, Bella who is more ambitious and strong-willed, wishes to open a restaurant with her mother's money. Throughout the play, although all the characters are physically and mentally crippled by Grandma Kurnitz's tyranny, they never give up defying her.

In her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt posits that living under the reing of a dictator in a totalitarian regime induces radical changes in identity as "life in the Nazi state had effectively destroyed personality" (Swift 57). In Grandma Kurnitz, "all warmth, generosity, and motherly compassion have apparently been sapped from her" (Koprince 122) sense of selfhood. Still suffering from the trauma of the Second World War and being a witness to totalitarianism, she replicates dictatorship in her private realm. In other words, she duplicates the suffocating and anti-utilitarian atmosphere that she herself was a victim of. The pernicious wound of the Holocaust casts its horrendous shadow on her roles as a woman and mother. She tells Arty: "Und if you vere a boy growing up in Germany, you vould be dead by now" (126). As a Jew surviving the Holocaust, she takes all her angst and desperation on her four children. This brutal situation is reminded to the audience when Jay tells Arty: "Did you ever notice there's something wrong with everyone on Pop's side of the family?" (90). Jay reveals his fear of Grandma Kurniz as such: "I was so afraid of her when I was a kid. She'd come out of that door with a limp and a cane and looked like she was going to kill you. When I was five, I drew a picture of her called it Frankesnstein's Grandma." (89). When Kurniz's son asks her to take care of his children, at first she denies to accommodate them. She believes that shedding tears is a sign of febleness as she claims that she has never cried in her life:

KURNIZ. How many times haff I seen you since you were born? Four, five times? Does are not grandchildren. Does are strangers. And now he comes to me for help? He cried I my bedroom. Not like a man, like a child he cried. He vas always dot vay [. . .] Dot's how I vas raised. To be strong. Vendet



beat us vit sticks in Germany venvevere children, I didn't cry . . . you don't survive in dis vorldvitout being like steel. (108)

Bella is the most harassed one. Aunt Bella, as Jay comments, is “closed for repairs” (90). She works at the candy store on the lower floor of their house, and she has always been monitored by her mother. Bella “is lost not so much because of her mental disability but because her mother has withheld affection from her over the years” (Koprince 124). Arendt views the ideology behind tyrannical dogmatism as a “system dependent upon the use of indoctrination and terror” which is incorporated with a “‘chaotic, nonutilitarian, manically dynamic movement of destruction’ that assaulted all aspects of being human” (Griffiths 115). David Rooney in his review titled “Sharing a Legacy of Loss among Three Generation” (2015), figures out how each character in the play has developed a peculiar personality under such circumstances: “Having witnessed violence as a girl and endured the loss of two of her six children to illness, Grandma has encased herself in loveless solitude. Like stunted Bella and timid Eddie, her other remaining adult children carry the legacy of her fearsome coldness. Gert is a walking respiratory complaint, and Louie, a swaggering bagman for the mob, attributes his toughness to Ma’s example”. Her status quo is deeply rooted in her past, a past where Hitler with his anti-Semitism was the central figure of the era. Even Arty draws attention to this fact in Act Two when he retorts: “You just want me to be miserable because somebody made you miserable in Germany. Even Pop said it. . . Well, that’s not my fault. Take it out on Hitler, not on me” (126).

Lost in Yonkers moots forward some palpable instances of Arendtian labor pertaining to the subjects’ struggle to make a living and provide their natural needs: “Right now I’d go into debt again just to eat an onion roll” (110); this is Eddie’s voice when he is writing to his children. The activity of labor, as Arendt explains, is relevant to the natural dimension of human life. She claims that “in the modern world it has become the dominant *public* activity. [...] It is essentially an isolated and lonely condition, in which man is involved in a relationship with his body” (Swift 50-2). However, Bella is the only person who struggles to find a leeway; she is determined to put an end to labor and propel action. She rebels against her mother’s authority



when her siblings never find the courage to defy her. In an interview with Bette Mandl, Simon affirms that Bella is “the strongest character I’ve ever written”, he also adds:

Bella was so strong because she took on her mother even though she was petrified of her mother. And the mother was so tyrannical, and I think the mother in a sense did a dreadful thing. I think she kept her that way in a sense just to be with her to take care of her in her old age. [...] It’s an enormously thing to do despite the fact that the grandmother thought that she was doing it in Bella’s interest. (94)

Arendt claims that under totalitarianism “there was no possibility of resisting, since they were all isolated, since they didn’t belong together anywhere, since not even a dozen people could get together, as it were, and trust one another” (*The Last Interview* 152). In contrast to her mother, Bella pines for love and communication. Although brought up under harsh conditions, she has got the capacity to be soft and warm, as Koprince mentions: “Bella rather than Grandma, actually provides the nurturing influence that her motherless nephews need in Yonkers apartment” (126-7). She faces Kurnitz telling her she wants to be the master of her own fate: “I’ll never stop wanting what I don’t have” (152). Therefore, Bella, the pilgrim on the path toward plural activity and communication, tries to establish an Arendtian work that could lead to action.

6. *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*: The Power of Work

Laughter on the 23rd Floor portrays a group of writers who gather at the office of The Max Prince Show. The play is set in a writing room on the 23rd floor of a building belonging to NBC. There are seven writers among which Max Prince is the star and leading presenter. The writers constantly come up with new ideas for their quite popular comedy show. But as the play progresses the audience learns that Prince has a continuous battle with NBC for broadcasting their show on its channel. NBC considers this show to be too sophisticated for the commoners in America. They order Prince to “give people shit”. However, Prince and his team begin resistance that results in the cancellation of their show and separation of the writers. Whereas the previous plays concentrate on the traumatic private realms, *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* deals with an active community in the public sphere. Moreover, what stands out



in this play is its dexterous manoeuvre on the communal world whose participants oppose discrimination and separation. Their being-together becomes clear when Max Prince cries out: “My writers are my flesh and blood” (280).

Subjects on the brink of action, in Arendt’s view, need a space to materialize their ideas by putting them into *praxis*. The world of *appearances* (in its Aristotelian sense) or public space is the locus for action achievable via work, which is the very space of human togetherness. Arendt, by posing the activity of work, tries to get back to its classical definition. She defines work as a particular human activity that changes raw materials into specific form, becoming the harbinger of “the durability of the world” (*The Human Condition* 100). Here, the sharp distinction between labor and work surfaces; while labor happens under the rubric of nature through an unending process of consumption, work, on the other hand “transforms nature and produces things which have durability and value” (Swift 52).

Although the writers in Simon’s play have different ideas and suggestions, they conduct and carry out work through collective activity. Each writer brings something worthwhile to the table. The “central theme”, as Koprince emphasizes in *Understanding Neil Simon*, “has to do with the importance of community” (140). A number of people with different backgrounds, dispositions, and ideas gather together in the public sphere and try to connect with each other. Such a plural community marked with each individual’s singularity is pointed out by Simon: “Milt Fields who wears unusual customs because he wants people, and especially Max, to notice him; Van Skolsky, “*the senior member of the staff*” (236), is a Russian immigrant who has a tendency “to comment on wryly on the American dream” (Koprince 142); Brian Doyle is an Irish man who is a “*heavy smoker, [...] and a heavy drinker, but with a biting sense of humor*” (239); Kenny Franks who is the wisest one in making jokes; Carol as the only woman who tries her best to be appealing to men; Ira Stone who is always under the delusion of having diseases, he dreams “to have a virus named after him” (247); Lukas, as a newcomer, endeavors to become friendly with others in order to keep his job. In fact, work constructs a space in which people can disclose their idiosyncrasies through their uniqueness, and according to Arendt, “can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table” (*The Human Condition* 137).



Despite their tensions, the writers never become hostile toward each other; they all insist on preserving their togetherness as Max admires them collaborating as a *working* team: “Max likes it in here, with us, not out there” (243). They deem their work as unique, something original they have produced as a group, not a generic comedy described as “shit”. Kenny admires Max as the one pioneering work in their group: “Has Max ever missed a show? Has Max ever missed a rehearsal? Has Max ever missed a writing session? Never. He’s in this room with us every day. Never an ego-inflated shit like most of the comics we’ve all worked with. Max is a professional. He’s dependable. He’s reliable” (247). It should be noted that, as they are working under the rules of NBC, they do not have the absolute freedom they desire, but Max does well as their leader to create some breathing space for them. He provides them with a substantial degree of freedom to hold on to their originality.

Max embodies Arendt’s notion of “power.” He has the power to unite his writers in order to produce the kind of show they yearn for. Together they resist the totalitarianism of NBC that exerts violence and force. According to Arendt, as Philip Walsh mentions in his *Arendt Contra Sociology* (2015): “Political regimes [. . .] enact violence against individuals and groups, but this usually has the effect of destroying power” (87). In this condition, power and violence are opposed to each other. Power is a platform for pluralism. But violence destroys plurality inflicting a sense of alienation in the public sphere. NBC constantly tries to devastate the writers’ communality and community by violating their work and thus alienating them from one another and the public space, enslaving them to labor. When Max is asked by NBC “to give people shit”, he confirms the existence of labor in the absence of work: “They can make money on shit” (254).

NBC orders Max to mesmerize the TV audience with mirages. This command galvanizes him to punch the wall, creating a big hole out of anger, since he does not want to be obsequious: “(HE turns and smashes his fist through the wall. His hand in the whole)” (256). Desiring to commemorate this moment, he asks Helen to call Tiffany, a framer: “I want that hole framed in their *best* silver. And underneath I want a plaque. Gold! And on the plaque I want engraved, “In honor of General George Marshal, Soldier, Statesman, Slandered by [...] McCarthy” (257). The hole resonates with Arendt’s concept of work whose envoys are architectures, builders, craftsmen



and so forth. The durability of work and its permanence is well reflected in the framed hole on the NBC office wall as Brain says: "I think this could be a national monument" (257). As the play proceeds, the violence of American media and the media of violence tend to suffocate the panache for work and political activity in Max's artisans. They are banned from their program, their work, as Max ironically and bitterly snaps at the American model of democracy: "*Freedom!* Independence! We are out. On our own" (295). Their work, originality, and zest for plurality are brought to a standstill by force because "they had only been *formulated*, but never philosophically *established* or grounded" (Arendt, *The Origins* 447). Now deprived of the public space, they are demoted to privatized labor and sheer survival.

7. Conclusion

Simon's comic theater displays deep ontological-political conflicts between power and violence, labor and action, the private sphere and the public realm. With the aid of Arendt's terminology, this article endeavored to achieve a freshly-minted understanding of human activities within society. Simon's plays purport to a kind of route map that consists of the genesis, triumph, organization, and decline of plural action. Despite the supremacy and totalitarianism of American mainstream culture and media, the residual effects of action can be observed in his plays. Action is subdued by the totalitarian violence, but it will always find a way to remain in the community. *Fools* demonstrates the substantial effect of action. In *Lost in Yonkers* only one character almost attains action. It is in *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* that Simon depicts the strongest effect of action and togetherness. Simon's comic theater strikes a resonant chord with politics as he considers the question of being as the product of communality and being-together. On his stage, political engagement is not interwoven with radicalization, protestation, or party-joining; it emanates from the *a priori* sense of being and living in the community, of the fact that human beings are always already communal. This is Simon's agenda for politics of theater.



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