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THEATER REVIEW | 'BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS'

## Neil Simon's Jeromes, at Home at the Nederlander



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Santino Fontana, left, and Noah Robbins in Neil Simon's play.

By BEN BRANTLEY  
Published: October 26, 2009

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## **Neil Simon's Jeromes, at Home at the Nederlander**

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There are many rooms, impeccably kept and waxed with nostalgia, in the wooden-frame Brooklyn house that has been built on the stage of the Nederlander Theater, where David Cromer's soft-spoken revival of Neil Simon's "Brighton Beach Memoirs" opened on Sunday night. But the spot that you really want to focus on is the second-floor bedroom on the left.

That's where the Jerome brothers, 14-year-old Eugene and 18-year-old Stanley, sleep, kvetch, fight, joke and occasionally cry during several momentous days in 1937. It is also the one room in the Jerome household where magic happens regularly. These acts of prestidigitation involve nothing more than two actors, Noah Robbins (as Eugene) and Santino Fontana (as Stanley), and Mr. Simon's snappy, streamlined dialogue.

When these young men exchange Mr. Simon's words, the jokes come second. They aren't reciting polished zingers from a Broadway master. It's as if they're inventing what they say on the spot: fumbling, pausing, listening, thinking and cracking each other up. Even discussing topics like whether Dad ever masturbated or what their curvy cousin looks like naked, these guys aren't playing to the audience. They're so totally tuned in to each other that we feel like delighted eavesdroppers.

Such spontaneity is seldom associated with productions of Neil Simon comedies. One of the most successful of all Broadway playwrights, whose hits include "Barefoot in the Park" and "The Odd Couple," Mr. Simon writes mannered, rhythmic dialogue that cries out for rimshots and point-scoring gestures. In his universe everybody's a comedian, Catskills-style. And even when his subjects are somber (bereavement in "Chapter Two," alcoholism in "The Gingerbread Lady"), his characters live by their one-liners.

Mr. Cromer, a fast-rising director out of Chicago, is determined to reveal the emotional pith beneath the comic sheen in this and another semi-autobiographical play by Mr. Simon about the Jeromes: "Brighton Beach Memoirs" (first staged here in 1983) will eventually be

performed in repertory with “Broadway Bound” (1986), which has its first preview on Nov. 18. The overlapping cast includes Laurie Metcalf, Dennis Boutsikaris and Jessica Hecht.

With “Memoirs,” at least, Mr. Cromer is only partly successful. His approach here, at least psychologically, is not unlike the one he brought to his enthralling revival of Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town” (still playing Off Broadway at the Barrow Street Theater). You can imagine him saying to his cast members, “Keep it natural, keep your voice down, and let the audience come to you.”

That advice is easier to follow with “Our Town,” a play that wears humility like a merit badge, than it is with “Memoirs,” in which the budding writer Eugene (Mr. Simon’s alter ego) serves as the play’s laugh-milking narrator. There are definitely moments in Mr. Cromer’s gentle production — particularly in intimate, tightly focused scenes between two characters — that are genuinely, freshly stirring. On other occasions, text and performance seem to be tugging in different directions.

“Memoirs” bears the same relationship to Mr. Simon’s work that “Ah, Wilderness!” does to Eugene O’Neill’s. Both plays are exercises in retrospective wish fulfillment, transforming their authors’ often fraught childhoods into sunny domestic harbors in which troubles only brought families closer and father really did know best.

In Mr. Simon’s version, that realm is ruled by Jack Jerome (Mr. Boutsikaris), a garment cutter and salesman, and his fretful but loving wife, Kate (Ms. Metcalf). It is the Depression, and tough times are made tougher by the addition to the Jerome household of Kate’s widowed sister, Blanche Morton (Ms. Hecht), and her daughters, the nubile Nora (Alexandra Socha) and the younger, sickly Laurie (Gracie Bea Lawrence).

The plot is structured with a mathematical care and precision that seemed old-fashioned even 26 years ago. (That formula is kept on life support today in some television sitcoms.) The family’s individual problems are carefully laid out; they are allowed to boil until they overflow into confrontation; and then they are resolved, at least temporarily, to everyone’s satisfaction.

The depiction of a whirling, crowded daily life — as closely packed relatives keep getting under one another’s feet while remaining firmly lodged in one another’s hearts — is part of what made “Memoirs” a hit in the early 1980s, when the ideal of the big American family had been under siege for years. And this version provides a warming, richly detailed homestead for the Jeromes in John Lee Beatty’s set. (Jane Greenwood’s Depression-era costumes and Brian MacDevitt’s honey-toned lighting enhance the effect.)

The problem is that when the Jeromes and Mortons all sit down at the dinner table, it's hard to believe that they belong to the same clan. Mr. Simon's family scenes require a degree of self-dramatization and good old loudness. The competition for attention is a crucial dynamic in any large family, and it makes all its members exaggerate their quirks.

In trying to subvert the cliché of the screaming Jewish family dinner, Mr. Cromer hasn't come up with an alternative connective sensibility. I was often aware of a host of individual performances — some of them very artful — that didn't necessarily link into the others. And there were times I felt an intellectual distance between the performers and their roles.

Ms. Metcalf, for example, is an excellent actress of assured technique and probing intelligence. You see it at work here in Kate's restless eyes, taking constant inventory of a house that she feels might collapse if she ever relaxed her vigilance, and in her bone-dry delivery of sentimental lines. But I was also aware of the conscientious craftswoman making those actress's choices.

Handsome and implacably assured, Mr. Boutsikaris isn't quite right for the weary, put-upon father, but given those restrictions he manages well. Of the adults, Ms. Hecht comes closest to a fully integrated performance as the uncertain, dependent Blanche. (As her daughters, Ms. Socha and Ms. Lawrence don't register strongly.) But her performance is so subdued and inward-looking that when Blanche finally erupts, you don't believe it.

Yet if this "Memoirs" seldom sings rousing in its choral scenes, it often makes lovely music in its duets. Mr. Boutsikaris and Ms. Metcalf have several throwaway moments, involving little more than exchanged glances and half-gestures, that say much about why their characters' marriage flourishes. Ms. Metcalf and Ms. Hecht have a gorgeous, underplayed scene of reconciliation that is one of the show's high points.

Family harmony and disharmony never sound more convincing in this production, though, than when Eugene and Stanley go one on one. Mr. Robbins, whose long comic's face suggests Woody Allen crossed with Buster Keaton, avoids being adorably glib in Eugene's asides to the audience.

But it takes Mr. Fontana's Stanley — a decent, thoughtful, worried fellow on the edge of manhood — to bring out the best in his kid brother. Which can also mean the worst. As Eugene observes, love and loathing are inextricably linked in family relationships. If that paradox feels only fitfully real in this production, it achieves affectingly vital life whenever the squabbling, interdependent Jerome boys take to their room.

## BRIGHTON BEACH MEMOIRS

By [Neil Simon](#); directed by David Cromer; sets by John Lee Beatty; costumes by Jane Greenwood; lighting by Brian MacDevitt; sound by Fitz Patton and Josh Schmidt; hair and wig design by Tom Watson; associate producer, Sheila Steinberg. Presented by Ira Pittelman, Max Cooper, Jeffrey A. Sine, Scott Delamn, Ruth Hendel, Roy Furman, Ben Sprecher/Wendy Federman, Scott Landis and Emanuel Azenberg. At the Nederlander Theater, 208 West 41st Street, Manhattan; (212) 307-4100. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

WITH: [Laurie Metcalf](#) (Kate Jerome), Dennis Boutsikaris (Jack Jerome), Santino Fontana (Stanley Jerome), Jessica Hecht (Blanche Morton), Gracie Bea Lawrence (Laurie Morton), Noah Robbins (Young Eugene Morris Jerome) and Alexandra Socha (Nora Morton).

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