

## Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor

### Background and Cast Breakdown with Historical Bases

This play is based on television history.

Although it conflates the writing staffs of two Sid Caesar television programs – *Your Show of Shows*, which ran from 1950-1954, and its successor, *Caesar's Hour*, which ran from 1954-1957 – *Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor* otherwise hews closely to the history of *Your Show of Shows*. The play is based on Simon's days as a young writer for that show. It takes place in 1953, when *Your Show of Shows* was widely considered by audiences and critics alike to be the best, most sophisticated comedy on TV. It shaped the way America thought of TV comedy – sitcoms and variety shows alike - for generations to come, and most of the writers who passed through its doors continued to wield an outsized influence through the 1980s and beyond. The show was performed live, without cue cards, and nobody ad-libbed. It was tightly scripted, scrupulously rehearsed and highly professional, with high-quality costumes and sets.

The plot arc of *Laughter on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor* mirrors the trajectory of *Your Show of Shows* itself. The show was originally 90 minutes long and had a large writing staff that was the highest paid in the business. However successful it was, the lavish budget was a constant thorn in NBC's side, and Caesar battled with the network continually over cuts. By 1953, the show's ratings had embarked on a two-year slide as audience tastes began trending toward the less sophisticated and, in 1954, the network won the battle. The show was cut to an hour that year, and then canceled altogether as NBC wanted its two main stars, Caesar and Imogene Coca, each to have their own show. Caesar's next incarnation was the aforementioned *Caesar's Hour*, which ran for three years; *The Imogene Coca show* lasted one season.

Apart from this play, *Your Show of Shows* was the inspiration for *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (its creator, Carl Reiner, was a regular both in front of, and behind, the camera on *Your Show of Shows*), as well as the 1982 Peter O'Toole film *My Favorite Year* (produced by Mel Brooks).

Ages given below are the ages of the real people behind the characters in 1953.

#### Character Descriptions (in order of appearance):

**Please note: Historical notes on the people behind the characters follow the descriptions; these will help provide perspective and context when you audition.**

##### Lucas Brickman (mid-late twenties):

Lucas has just started his second week as a writer on *The Max Prince* show. He's on a four-week "try-out" contract. He's very much "the new guy" among an already-legendary writing staff, trying to fit in, become one of the group, and impress everyone enough to be hired permanently. He is also among the least neurotic of the bunch.

##### Milt Fields (early 30s):

Milt is a rapid-fire joke machine. He considers himself to be a cheap "wholesaler" among the other writers, who are "Tiffany" quality. Highly insecure, he tries to stand out by dressing flamboyantly and attempting to be a ladies' man.

##### Val Slotsky (early 40s):

Val is the senior member of the staff, and the most politically aware of the bunch. As a Russian Immigrant, he speaks with a strong accent. He is self-deprecating in an-your-face kind of way. He states his philosophy in the play: All humor is based on hostility.

**Brian Doyle** (early 30s):

A chain smoker and heavy drinker, Brian epitomizes the cynical, hard-living writer. He's acerbic, bitter and has grandiose ideas that, any moment now, Hollywood will come calling. He and Ira are constantly at each other's throats.

**Kenny Franks** (mid-twenties):

Kenny is the golden boy of the group – highly respected by all despite the fact that he's the youngest, he's sophisticated, worldly and self-assured.

**Carol Wyman** (late 20s):

Carol is the lone woman on the writing staff. She is a veteran of the industry, having survived, and thrived, in this male-dominated environment. In the first act, she's been trying to get pregnant. In the second act, it is obvious she has succeeded. She is more mature and self-aware than most of her colleagues but is every bit as passionate and quick-witted.

**Max Prince** (early 30s):

Max Prince is the star of the most popular show on television: *The Max Prince Show*. Like the characters he plays each week on camera, He is larger than life off camera as well. When he enters a room, he FILLS the room. He has a brilliant madness to him that is exacerbated by his use of alcohol and sleeping pills to fight his perpetual insomnia; increasingly, it either dissipates into disorientation or devolves into out-and-out paranoia. He is a comic genius with a work ethic that is equally impressive. He is a serious professional – and a seriously funny man. He does everything with gusto, exuberance, passion and abandon.

**Helen** (late 20s)

Helen is the quintessential secretary for the group. She is kind-hearted and in awe of the talent she is privileged to be so close to. Her dream is to become a comedy writer herself. Unfortunately, she does not possess an ounce of comedic talent. But she is amiable and, although she is uneducated, she is self-possessed and unafraid to speak her mind.

**Ira Stone** (late 20s)

Ira is the most annoying member of the writing team – by far. He is a chronic hypochondriac and shameless attention seeker who is also extremely argumentative. Although he is late for work every day, and generally disruptive it is always he who is the victim. Unfortunately, he is also extremely funny and very inventive. If you don't kill him, you kind of like him. He and Brian are always at each other's throats.

## **Historical Notes about the Characters in This Play and the People Behind them**

**Lucas Brickman:** (25 years old)

Based on Neil Simon. Simon was born in 1927 in The Bronx, NY, to Jewish parents. The family moved to Washington Heights in upper Manhattan, where Simon grew up during the depression. His father was a garment salesman; his mother, a homemaker. He had one brother, Danny, who was eight years older.

Due to financial problems and his parents' strained marriage, it was an unhappy childhood; Simon took refuge in the movies; Charlie Chaplin's comic genius was an inspiring distraction from his troubled childhood. At one point, his father abandoned the family, and at other times Neil and Danny were forced to live with different relatives, or the family had to take in boarders.

Simon said that part of what made him a writer was the need to block "some of the really ugly, painful things in my childhood and cover it up with a humorous attitude . . . do something to laugh until I was able to forget what was hurting.

Simon attended Dewitt Clinton High School. After a stint in the Air Force reserve, he attended the University of Denver from 1945 to 1946. Upon graduation, he worked at Warner Brothers' East Coast mailroom in Manhattan. He and his brother, who'd begun writing comedy sketches while Neil was in high school, reteamed and got various jobs writing for radio and early television shows until they were both hired as writers for Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*.

**Milt Fields** (30 years old)

Based on Sheldon Keller. Keller was born in Chicago to Jewish Polish immigrants and attended the University of Illinois, where he began writing comedy. He served in the Pacific Theater with the United States Army Signal Corps, where he met Carl Reiner. After the war, he moved to New York in the hopes of becoming a comedian. He soon began writing for television and in 1955 was hired to write for Sid Caesar's follow-up to *Your Show of Shows*, *Caesar's Hour*. He also created the game show *I've got a Secret*, wrote specials for Frank Sinatra, Danny Kaye and Carol Channing, as well as episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *M\*A\*S\*H* and other TV series.

**Val Slotsky** (40 years old)

Based on Mel Tolkin, who was the head writer on the show. Originally named Shmuel Tolchinsky, Tolkin's family emigrated to Montreal, Quebec in 1926 from a Jewish shtetl near Odessa, Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire), due to the empire's ongoing anti-Semitic pogroms. After studying accounting, Tolchinsky created his pseudonym and began writing songs and sketches for local revues and playing piano in jazz clubs. After serving in the Canadian Army military orchestra during World War II, he moved to New York City and teamed with Lucille Kallen and began writing comedy for performers at the Jewish resort Camp Tamiment in the Pocono mountains in Pennsylvania, which was the incubator for many future stars (including Danny Kaye, Imogene Coca, Jerome Robbins, Carol Burnett and Woody Allen, among others). As a team, he and Kallen were the stole writing staff for NBC's variety show *The Admiral Broadway Revue*, out of which Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows* was born; he and Kallen moved to the new show when it was formed. After his time writing for Sid Caesar, Tolkin wrote for many TV shows, including *All in the Family*, *Archie Bunker's Place*, and Tony Randall's sitcom *Love, Sidney*. He also wrote comedy for standup comics such as Bob Hope, Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye and Danny Thomas.

**Brian Doyle** (31 years old)

Based on Tony Webster, who was the only non-Jewish writer on the staff. He was born and raised in St. Louis and attended the University of Missouri before being drafted into the army. Upon his discharge, he moved to New York and quickly became one of the more reliable gag writers in the business. He got a high-profile job as a writer for the popular *Bob and Ray* radio series and for TV on *The Phil Silvers Show*, and from there was hired on to the *Your Show of Shows* staff. He is quoted as having said "Comedy goes right past tragedy," and "I try to make people identify with a situation in comic terms where it would be too painful on a serious level." He left *Your Show of Shows* in 1954 and went to Hollywood, where he was a prolific writer up to his death (from esophageal cancer in 1987) for shows such as *Car 54*, *Where Are You?*, *That Was the Week That Was*, *The Red Skelton Hour*, *The Kraft Music Hall*, *Love American Style*, *Doc*, and *The Love Boat*. He also wrote specials for Art Carney, Bing Crosby, Steve Lawrence and Jonathan Winters. Additionally, he wrote a play, *The Greatest Man Alive*, and released at least two comedy albums. He was married twice and divorced twice.

**Kenny Franks** (25 years old)

Based on Larry Gelbart, who was born in 1928 Chicago to Jewish immigrants – his father from Latvia and his mother from Poland. During his childhood, the family moved to Los Angeles. After attending high school, Gelbart was drafted into the army just after World War II ended, where he worked for the Armed Force Radio Service in Los Angeles. He was honorably discharged after serving one year and 11 days – those 11 days saved him from being drafted into the Korean War. He began writing comedy at 16 after his father, a barber who knew Thomas slightly, showed him some jokes Gelbart had written. During the 1940s, Gelbart also wrote for Jack Paar and Bob Hope; when *Your Show of Shows* was launched, he was hired on immediately. Gelbart attained even more acclaim in the 1970s as one of the main forces behind the creating of the *M\*A\*S\*H* television show. He wrote the pilot and several episodes; he produced the show and occasionally directed during its first four seasons. He also co-wrote the screenplay for 1982's *Tootsie*, and several other films, including *Oh, God*, *Movie, Movie*, *Bedazzled*, and *Rough Cut*, to name a few. Additionally, he co-wrote the

book for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, and singly wrote the book for *City of Angels* and *Sly Fox*, as well as television scripts for *Barbarians at the Gate*, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, and *And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself*.

**Carol Wyman** (31 years old)

Based on Lucille Kallen, who was born in 1922 in Los Angeles. As a teenager, she went to the Juilliard School in New York to study classical music, but abandoned her studies after being told her fingers were too short for the piano. She remained in New York and turned to writing sketches for musical reviews. In the audience one night was Max Liebman, who had already launched the career of Danny Kaye from Camp Tamiment, the Jewish resort in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania that spawned many entertainment careers (including Mel Tolkin, Imogene Coca, Jerome Robbins, Carol Burnett and Woody Allen, among others). Liebman produced and directed the camp's musical shows. Throughout 1948, Kallen co-wrote a new review each week with Mel Tolkin, who would go on to collaborate with her on *Your Show of Shows*. Liebman took many Camp Tamiment alumni with him to television for *The Admiral Broadway Review*, and then to its successor, *Your Show of Shows* starring Coca other another Liebman discovery: Sid Caesar. Of the writing sessions, which Tolken referred to as "mob jobs," Kallen said, "I'd have to stand on a desk and wave my red sweater. Let's face it, gentility was never a noticeable part of our working lives." After NBC separated Caesar and Coca and gave each their own show, Kallen (along with Brooks) went with Coca, whose show lasted only a year. She gave up on television and went on to write a modestly successful Broadway play (*Maybe Tuesday*), and then an autobiographical novel, *Outside There, Somewhere*. In 1979 she wrote the first of five witty mystery novels in which the publisher of a suburban newspaper solves a series of murders with the invaluable assistance of his star reporter, Maggie Rose. She died in 1999.

**Max Prince** (32 years old)

Based on Sid Caesar, who was born in 1922 to Jewish immigrants from Poland who settled in Yonkers, New York, where they ran a luncheonette. Sid was the youngest of three sons. When he wasn't at school, Sid helped out at the restaurant. Since the area was filled with a melting pot of immigrants, Sid learned to mimic their patois – the language traits and dialect that were characteristic of their homelands (primarily Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Spain, and Hungary) – to perfection. He called this comic skill "doublespeak," so named because, although non-speakers of these languages would swear he was speaking them fluently, it was nonsense. In truth he only spoke English and Yiddish. He made use of this skill for the rest of his life, to the delight of generations of audiences.

Caesar's childhood dream was to become a musician; when he was 14, he went to the Catskill Mountain resort area as a saxophonist. He would occasionally perform in comedy sketches as well. In 1939 he enlisted in the Coast Guard and was stationed in Brooklyn, where he played in military revues and shows. While in the service, he was ordered to Palm Beach, Florida, where he met producer Max Liebman, who was impressed with Caesar's comic talent, and became part of a service revue Liebman was producing called *Tars and Spars* – Liebman would later produce shows at Camp Tamiment with many of the writers on *Your Show of Shows* as well as Imogene Coca.

After a brief stint in Hollywood, in which Caesar appeared in a film version of *Tars and Spars* and had roles in a couple of other movies – an experience he found distasteful – he decided to move back to New York, where he was the opening act for many stars of the day at the Copacabana nightclub. He was reunited with Liebman, which led to a Broadway revue for which he sang, acted, double-talked, pantomimed and wrote the music. He won a *Donaldson Award* in 1948 for his contributions to the show.

His TV career began with an appearance on Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* in 1948; in 1949, Liebman had gotten NBC to agree to a new show called *Admiral Broadway Revue*, co-starring Imogene Coca. Admiral, the TV maker who sponsored the show, withdrew its sponsorship after a year because it couldn't keep up with the demand for television sets and from the ashes of that show arose *Your Show of Shows*.

As the price of TVs came down, the number of sets sold skyrocketed, which meant the tastes of viewers was diluted – audiences craved less highbrow entertainment than what *Your Show of Shows* offered and NBC canceled the show in

1954 and then re-imagined it as *Caesar's Hour* – which was successful for three more years. At the same time, NBC gave Imogene Coca her own hour-long TV show, which took some of the writers from *Your Show of Shows* with it, but her show lasted only one year. This form of comedy – the golden age that was the formative years of television, with sketches as long as 20 minutes - was coming to a close. Alfred Hitchcock compared Caesar to Charlie Chaplin, and critic John Crosby said that Caesar “could wrench laughter out of you with the violence of his great eyes and the sheer immensity of his parody.” Although Caesar spent a great deal of time with his writers, he didn't write the material – he acted it out and improved upon it just by his presence. He was very close to his writers, but the conflicts were also titanic – one time he dangled a terrified Mel Brooks out an 18<sup>th</sup> floor window until colleagues restrained him. He really was as mercurial, unpredictable and occasionally as paranoid as his counterpart, Max Prince, is portrayed in the play.

After almost a decade as a prime-time star, Caesar's perch at the pinnacle of stardom eroded rapidly. Television was moving on. He became more dependent on alcohol and prescription medications. Many, including his friend Mel Brooks, said that the pressure of performing live for almost 10 years had ground him into sausage.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Caesar continued to make occasional television and theater appearances. He performed in the Mel Brooks movies *Silent Movie* and *History of the World Part 1*, and in *Grease* in 1978, and its sequel in 1982. In 1971 he appeared on Broadway in *Four on a Garden* opposite Carol Channing. In 1977 gave up alcohol and sleeping pills altogether. He continued to appear on various television shows and in movies through the 2000s, receiving honors, awards and tributes along the way. Of Caesar, his wife of 66 years, Florence, said “You know, he's not funny all the time. He can be very serious.” Of his own life as a comedian, Caesar once said, “Learn to laugh at yourself, and you will find yourself laughing at things that would make other people cry.” He died in 2014 at the age of 91.

#### **Helen** (late 20s)

Helen is not based on any historical person.

#### **Ira Stone** (27 years old)

Based on Mel Brooks, who was born Melvin Kaminsky in Brooklyn, New York. His father's family were German Jews from Danzig (then in Germany, now part of Poland), and his mother's family were Jews from Kiev in the Ukraine. Brooks grew up small and sickly and was often bullied and teased by his classmates. Brooks once said “I'm sure a lot of my comedy is based on anger and hostility. Growing up in Williamsburg, I learned to clothe it in comedy to spare myself problems – like a punch in the face.”

After seeing a production of *Anything Goes* on Broadway with his uncle Joe, Brooks decided he was going to forego the garment business in which the rest of his family worked and go into show business instead. He went to work at the age of 14 in the Catskills as a “pool tumbler” – tumbler is a Yiddish word that, in this context, means a combination busboy/social director/entertainer at Jewish resorts who would entertain people who were lounging poolside or around other common areas. He was taught by Buddy Rich to play drums and started to earn money as a musician. He changed his name to Mel Brooks while still in his teens (his mother's maiden name was Brookman) because he was often confused with another musician, trumpeter Max Kaminsky.

Brooks attended high school in Brooklyn and planned on attending Brooklyn College as a psychology major. He was drafted into the army in 1944. He scored highly on an IQ test and was sent for elite training at the Virginia Military Institute to be taught specialized skills; the group was disbanded, however, and he ended up in Europe defusing land mines as the allies advanced into Nazi Germany. After the war ended, Brooks took part in organizing shows for captured Germans and American troops.

Upon his discharge from the army, Brooks returned to the Catskill resorts as a drummer and pianist, then started doing standup comedy. He also began acting in summer stock productions. He eventually got hired as the tumbler at one of the Catskills' elite resorts – Grossinger's. However, Brooks found that he preferred working behind the scenes and, in 1949, his friend Sid Caesar hired Books to write jokes for *The Admiral Broadway Review*, which later morphed into Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*.

Brooks followed when *Your Show of Shows* was reborn as *Caesar's Hour*, during which time Brooks became very close with fellow *Your Show of Shows/Caesar's Hour* colleague Carl Reiner. They began improvising a bit they called *The 2,000 Year-old Man*, in which Carl Reiner is the straight man interviewing Brooks, who plays a man who is 2,000 years old, at parties; it became famous among their friends in the industry, and when influential theater critic Kenneth Tynan saw it, he declared Brooks "the most original comic improviser I have ever seen." The act became a regular on *The Steve Allen Show* in the early 1960s and was reprised periodically – on comedy albums and TV specials - for decades afterward.

After writing the book for a Tony-nominated Broadway musical, *All American*, in 1962, and creating a short film called *The Critic* which won the Academy Award for Animated Short Film in 1963, Brooks teamed with writer Buck Henry to create the TV show *Get Smart*.

For several years, Brooks had toyed with the idea of a musical comedy about Adolph Hitler, which became his first feature film, *The Producers* (1967) Although a huge hit in underground circles, the film was only moderately successful due to its brazen subject matter (it did, however, win the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for 1968). He later turned it into a Broadway musical where it garnered 12 Tony awards.

Brooks followed with several parody films – some are now classics, some lesser known – *The Twelve Chairs* (1970); *Blazing Saddles*, *Young Frankenstein* (both 1974); *Silent Movie* (1976), *High Anxiety* (1977), *History of the World Part 1* (1981), *Spaceballs* (1987), *Life Stinks* (1991), *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993) and *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995). Brooks also produced non-parody comedies – 1980's *Fatso*, starring his wife, Anne Bancroft, and 1982's *My Favorite Year*, which was based on Brooks' experiences during *Your Show of Shows*. Brooks also produced more serious fare, such as 1980's *The Elephant Man*; *Frances* (1982), *The Fly* (1986), and *84 Charing Cross Road* (1987).

Brooks is still alive and kicking and is one of the few people who have received an Oscar, and Emmy, a Tony and a Grammy.