

Film Review Simon's Serious Comedy Of Contemporary Nostalgia By Janet Maslin (May 14,1993)

Within the canon of its author's work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Lost in Yonkers" is an oxymoron. This is the serious Neil Simon play, **the heartbreaking family comedy**, the **nostalgia piece with the strangely contemporary air**. Whichever way you look at it, Mr. Simon's best-received play is **one of his most idiosyncratic**, being the story of an emotionally arrested child-woman, her Prussian general of a mother, two temporarily abandoned teen-age boys and their gangster uncle, who is either "a henchman" or "a hunchback," depending upon who in the family is asked to describe him.

} overall **opinion** of Reviewer & overview of **what the play is about**

Only because it comes from Mr. Simon does this material take on universal appeal. "Lost in Yonkers" somehow **isolates a central vision of domestic love and conflict**, one that emerges more and more clearly as the play focuses tightly on Bella, the young woman yearning for independence, and Grandma, the mother who refuses to let her go. Before it is over, the story has traded in its more whimsical touches for moments of real anguish, and for a riveting climactic argument between these two formidable women. It's not necessary to feel much about the play's time (1942), its place (Yonkers) or its precise setting (a family-run candy store and adjoining apartment) to be moved by this fierce final battle. But Mr. Simon has supplied ample comic interludes and distractions to surround this central struggle, and all of those lighter aspects have been preserved and expanded on screen.

} discusses **theme / plot**

As adapted by Mr. Simon himself and directed smoothly and adroitly by Martha Coolidge, Neil Simon's "Lost in Yonkers" is **sometimes more picturesque than powerful**. But it **conveys all the warmth and color of the original material**. Mr. Simon may have written droll dialogue about the candy store (it's said that Grandma is so watchful she even knows when salt is missing from a pretzel), but the movie can bring that dialogue to life. It can linger lovingly on the decor, the soda fountain, the candy, and it does.

} **opinions** backed up by **specific examples** (analyzes directing)

Indeed, the film itself seems candy-coated at times, particularly when it dwells on the adorable ingenuousness of Bella (played by Mercedes Ruehl, in a reprise of her Tony-winning role). Prancing in anklets and a startling array of tight, girlish frocks, Ms. Ruehl leaves no doubt that Bella's childlike spirit is trapped in an extremely womanly form. The film expands the pathos of Bella's predicament by bringing on Johnny (David Strathairn, in an especially touching, offbeat performance), the shy movie usher with whom Bella embarks on a tentative courtship. Late in the story, a surprisingly emotional scene between these two gives the film a welcome element of raw emotion.

} **opinions** backed up by **specific examples** (analyzes characters / actors' performances)

Example **Movie** Critique

It takes a while for "Lost in Yonkers" to reveal its serious side. First Mr. Simon must introduce his array of antic characters, from the wisecracking brothers Jay and Arty (Brad Stoll and Mike Damus, two deft and funny young actors) to the relatives with whom they are unceremoniously parked by their father (Jack Laufer). Much is made of the boys' tremulousness around Grandma, who is played so commandingly by Irene Worth (also in a reprise of a Tony-winning role) that the whole film seems ready to stand at attention when she appears. Ms. Worth's wonderfully formidable performance brings the film strength and menace, as well as a gravity it might otherwise lack.



opinions
backed up by
specific
examples
(script &
characters/
actors)

Providing a lot of comic relief is Richard Dreyfuss in the expanded role of Uncle Louie, the ineffectual gangster who hides out with his family at a critical moment and wins over Arty and Jay with his well-developed sense of fun. (At one point, teaching one of his nephews how to play cards, he tries to insist that four aces make a bad hand.) "It's like having a James Cagney movie in your own house," one of the boys says proudly of Uncle Louie, although it's a bit like having Ralph Kramden around, too. Mr. Dreyfuss postures up a storm and makes the most of the role's grandstanding possibilities.



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The production design by David Chapman is nicely evocative of many things (among them Woody Allen's Brooklyn). The film's tone remains tirelessly pert right up to the point where its battle royal is allowed to take center stage, which makes *Lost in Yonkers* a timeless play in the Neil Simon cannon that viewers of any age can enjoy.



closing
thoughts