

# "Broadway Bound" a real gift to viewers

Skillful cast hits perfect note

By Steven Alan McGaw

Neil Simon turned a corner in 1983, as a playwright and, one suspects, as a man. That was the year his nostalgic, emotionally centered "Brighton Beach Memoirs" debuted on Broadway. His well-known skill for rapid-fire one-liners was still in evidence but balanced with a serious, wistful story line. Eugene Jerome, a 14-year-old in love with radio, writing and the Yankees, reflected the young Simon, and the play offered a window to the writer's youth.

Next came "Biloxi Blues," as the 18-year-old Eugene found himself in the blazing Mississippi heat, learning a little about the Army and a lot about love. Like the earlier play, "Biloxi Blues" was made into a movie and reached a wide, appreciative audience, if slightly diluted from Simon's original dark, often melancholy drama.

Now, the third installment of Eugene's saga is set on film, this time for the home screen, and it's the best of the lot. Billed as an "ABC Theater" presentation, "Neil Simon's Broadway Bound" debuts on Monday, March 23. Simon himself has adapted his play for the intimacy of television, and it's a perfect match of medium and material.

"Broadway Bound" takes place in 1948, once more in the Jeromes' worn Bronx household. Eugene and his older brother Stan, each in their 20s, are struggling to make a name for themselves as comedy writers. Thus far, their success has been limited to a few monologues sold to a man who plays weddings and bar mitzvahs. Then Stan hears of an opportunity... to show their work to someone at CBS. There's only one problem: The brothers have just one night to write the sketch.

Stan and Eugene are not alone in the house. Their irascible, socialist grandfather Ben is likely to be found asleep somewhere or covering his failing health with off-putting bluster. The boys' devoted, sharp-tongued mother is always ready to

offer something to eat, but less generous with disclosing the sadness of her loveless marriage. Jack Jerome is almost a stranger in the house, distanced from his wife and sons by his own disillusionment.

As the boys wrack their brains for comedic inspiration, they realize not only the depth of their ambitions, but what the inevitable source of their humor will be. Out of their own lives, their own troubled, contradictory family, the jokes will almost write themselves. The brothers have inherited their mother's gift of humor, of displacing her own pain and unrest with a fresh and funny viewpoint. Laughter is not flight from reality, but the best way to wrestle with it.

Matthew Broderick created the role of Eugene Jerome on Broadway, with understudy Jonathan Silverman stepping in for the screen portrayal in "Brighton Beach." Broderick then reclaimed the role for the big-screen adaptation of "Biloxi Blues." Now,

Corey Parker plays the thinly disguised Simon alter ego and he's every bit as good as his predecessors. Silverman now takes the role of Stan, in a performance that's alternately charming, angry and hilarious.

Anne Bancroft is luminous as Kate Jerome, the mother whose humor and toughness inspires her sons more than they know. Hume Cronyn is hilarious and touching as Ben, and Jerry Orbach makes a tragic hero of the boys' largely unsympathetic dad. Michele Lee delivers a brief but excellent performance as Blanche, Kate's sister, whose marriage to a rich man is a source of ceaseless irritation to her leftist father.

"Neil Simon's Broadway Bound" is television at its best, in every aspect. The direction, by four-time Emmy winner Paul Bogart, is taut and sure, and the costumes and art direction hit the period mark perfectly.



Wednesdays on ABC, *Homefront* spins tales of love and labor unions. Series regulars include (from left) David Newsom, Harry O'Reilly, Jessica Stoen and John Slatery.