

Written by **Ellen Simon**

# ASS

## World Premiere

By Ellen Simon  
Directed by Karen Azenberg

October 22 -  
November 6, 2021

*Runtime: 2:10 which includes a  
15-minute intermission*

# SPOTLIGHT STUDY GUIDE

For Teachers and Students



Pioneer Theatre Company's Student Matinee Program is made possible through the support of Salt Lake County's Zoo, Arts and Parks Program, The Simmons Family Foundation, and The Meldrum Foundation Endowment Fund.



# SO, THE TITLE.

by Playwright Ellen Simon

You may be wondering if I am applying an admittedly in-your-face label to someone in particular? To a certain character in the play maybe, or to someone from my own life? It could simply refer to a sculpture emerging in stone.

But as I myself do come from a complicated family, let's start there.

Our communication was admittedly patchy at times, even though we are mostly all writers, and usually pretty good at expressing ourselves. Is there a play somewhere in there, I thought? Maybe they aren't writers. That seemed too close for comfort and probably annoying to watch. Like paint drying. Paint? Maybe one's an artist? A great artist who sculpts body parts? Which body part? Oh. That could work, if I dare.

I began writing this play around fifteen years ago, wanting to move away from romantic comedies, to try something intimate, theatrical, and thematically deeper.

I thought of my own playwright-father's advice to 1) write what you know, and 2) make sure there is conflict. I also thought about my favorite plays, all family-based stories, and so fashioned a family completely different than my own, while also being quite similar in how they behave badly. We at my house could be articulate grumblers and finger-pointers amid all the love. I wanted to try and walk the line between comedy and drama, to see how broadly I could amplify the funny while still being real. And I wanted to create a familiar dynamic similar to what I had experienced growing up, but to also find a story that took on a life of its own, grounded in outrage and truth, that also had to earn the cheeky title that I can't even share with my own grandson!

My wish for you tonight: hold on to your hats, and please enjoy...

*Ellen Simon spent her youth watching her father, playwright Neil Simon, work on Broadway before launching her own successful career as a screenwriter and playwright.*



**ELLEN SIMON** (Playwright) wrote the screenplays for *One Fine Day* and *Moonlight and Valentino*, based upon her stage play. She also worked on *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*, as well as doing rewrites for numerous other films. Her plays have been performed at Duke Broadway Preview Series, Stages Repertory in Houston, and The Pasadena Playhouse. Ellen wrote for the television series, "thirtysomething," and created a sitcom pilot for NBC. She is most grateful to Karen Azenberg and PTC for the 2018 staged reading of *Ass* in their Play-by-Play series, and now for their mainstage production.

# GENERATIONAL ART

## REPRINTED FROM *THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE*, APRIL 2018

*Ass was first introduced to PTC audiences in 2018, as a selection of its popular new play reading series called Play-by-Play. New plays come to life through repeated readings and workshops culminating in a premiere performance. Ellen Fagg Weist, reporter for The Salt Lake Tribune interviewed PTC Artistic Director Karen Azenberg, and Ellen Simon, the playwright, in 2018 for this piece on the eve of its developmental reading.*

Let's get some stage business out of the way right away: The "Ass" in the title of Ellen Simon's play isn't a character based on her famous father, Neil Simon.

"It is reflective of aspects of my relationship with him, but the artist in this is really more of a Picasso guy," she says. Her character, a famous sculptor, "has an enormous ego, and my father wasn't like that."

That would be a simplistic reading of this layered family comedy, which draws upon

the idea of synecdoche, how parts can represent the whole in art and in families. *Ass* is receiving a staged reading as part of Pioneer Theatre Company's Play-by-Play development series on Friday and Saturday.

The story revolves around a genius artist and his relationships with his ninth wife and his son and daughter-in-law. It's a story about creativity and ego and celebrity and family, set in a loft anchored by a huge alabaster stone out of which a derriere is being carved.

"The flavor of the difficulty in their communication is reflective of me and my dad," says Simon, who made her own way in Hollywood, writing for TV's "thirtysomething," as well as screenplays for movies such as "One Fine Day" and "Moonlight and Valentino." "We had a difficult time, but it takes two. It took me a long time to realize that."

Utah audiences, even those who aren't related to creative geniuses, might relate to the play's exploration of complicated family dynamics, as well as questions of legacy. PTC Artistic Director Karen Azenberg

jokes that the idea of a ninth wife might suggest something different for some Salt Lake City theatergoers.

Ironically, Utah might be an especially good place to develop a second generation of Simon stories, as Cedar City hosts the country's only theater festival dedicated to Neil Simon's work, now in its 16th year. The playwright is considered the comedic bard of New York. He's noted for his more than 30 plays and screenplays, ranging from 1963's "Barefoot in the Park" and 1969's "The Odd Couple" to 1991's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Lost in Yonkers."

"He wrote about his family all the time, with no apology," Ellen Simon says. "I grew up in that household. I learned that was OK. You take from life and you make art."

As for *Ass*, Simon admits it's a blunt title, already causing wrinkles in publicizing the reading on Facebook and in newspaper headlines.

But the word offers so many layers of literal and figurative meanings, "I couldn't think of anything better and nothing else

seemed to fit better,” the playwright says. “The stone is center stage, and into the stone is being carved somebody’s ass, and the artist’s wife is convinced it’s hers, because she needs it to be hers, because that will make her whole. And then there’s the question of who in this family is the ass, and truly they all are.”

Adding another dimension to this developmental reading is that it’s directed by her longtime friend. Azenberg’s father, Manny Azenberg, is a Broadway legend who produced Neil Simon’s plays for more than three decades.

As girls, “we would go to opening nights together in our dresses,” Ellen Simon says of Karen Azenberg. Both went on to break into theater as dancers and choreographers.

Theater people who read *Playbill* credits might be fascinated by the idea of seeing another generation of Azenbergs and Simons on the same stage. Their shared history helped them shorthand conversations about the play. “I think that’s another thing we share, that second-generation thing,” Azenberg says.

The play is ready for an audience, Azenberg says, because of the sophisticated work that Simon has done in considering

family dynamics.

“It’s a play by Ellen Simon. Period,” Azenberg says. “She’s a writer. She has a voice. She’s very skilled, her rewrites are terrific, and she’s unafraid of them.”



**Ellen Simon with T. Ryder Smith, who plays Jule in Ass.**

# SCULPTURE

Sculpture is an artistic form in which hard or plastic materials are worked into three-dimensional art objects.

A variety of media may be used, including clay, wax, stone, metal, fabric, glass, wood, plaster, rubber, and random “found” objects. Materials may be carved, modeled, molded, cast, wrought, welded, sewn, assembled, or otherwise shaped and combined.

Sculpture since the 20th century has not been confined carving and/or modeling or to such traditional natural materials as stone, metal, wood, ivory, bone, and clay. Because present-day sculptors use any materials and methods of manufacture that will serve their purposes, the art of sculpture can no longer be identified with any special materials or techniques.

- Describe the kinds of sculpture and what media that Jule has done in his career. What materials does he use in *Ass*? Why?
- Who are other famous sculptors in real life? What kinds of materials do they use?

*Source: Britannica*



## ALABASTER

Alabaster is a mineral or rock that is soft, often used for carving, and is processed for plaster powder. Archaeologists and the stone processing industry use the word differently from geologists. The former use it in a wider sense that includes varieties of two different minerals: the fine-grained massive type of gypsum and the fine-grained banded type of calcite. Geologists define alabaster only as the gypsum type. Chemically, gypsum is a hydrous sulfate of calcium, while calcite is a carbonate of calcium.

## GRANITE

Jule would also sculpt with granite. Granite is one of the hardest types of igneous rock. The most common color of granite is gray, but pink, green and even yellow shades exist. When speaking about sculpting, granite is sometimes called “monumental stone,” as many monuments are made from it. Because of the hard composition of granite, it is one of the most difficult stones to carve.

## GRANITE

For what kinds of projects might a sculptor choose one over the other?

## THEME

What ideas are wrestled with in the play?  
What questions does the play pose?

Family drama can be an interesting plot point for a story. What are some family dramas in your *own* family that might make an interesting plot element?

Have you known people like the characters in the play?

## CHARACTERS

How do each of the characters relate to each other? How would you describe Jule and Tory’s relationship? Jule and Ana’s? Jule and Will’s? How about Tory and Will’s? Ray and Jule’s?

How do the backgrounds of the characters affect how the characters act?

## MUSIC

Will Van Dyke, the music composer for this production, created original music to accompany the story. How does accompanying music and sound help tell the story?

## PLAYS VS. MOVIES OR TV

Ellen Simon has also written for TV and movies. Could this be a movie or TV script? Why? What could change to

accommodate the screen?

# FOR THE TEACHER

## BE PROMPT

Give your students plenty of time to arrive, find their seats, and get situated. Have them visit the restrooms before the show begins.

## RESPECT OTHERS

Please remind your students that their behavior and responses affect the quality of the performance and the enjoyment of the production for the entire audience. Live theatre means the actors and the audience are in the same room, and just as the audience can see and hear the performers, the performers can see and hear the audience. Please ask your students to avoid disturbing those around them. Please no talking or disruptive movement during the performance. Also, please remind students that cell phones should be switched off completely. When students give their full attention to the action on the stage, they will be rewarded with the best performance possible.

## GOOD NOISE, BAD NOISE

Instead of instructing students to remain totally silent, please discuss the difference between appropriate responses (laughter, applause, participation when requested) and inappropriate noise (talking, cell phones, etc).

With the actors present on stage, the audience response becomes an integral part of the performance and the overall experience: the more involved and attentive the audience, the better the show. Please remind your students that they play an important part in the success of the performance.

## STAY WITH US

Please do not leave or allow students to leave during the performance except in absolute emergencies. Again, reminding them to use the restrooms before the performance will help eliminate unnecessary disruption.

# OUR EQUITY CAST



**BEN CHERRY** (Will) Broadway: *Indecent*, *Fiddler on the Roof*. National tour: *Mary Poppins*. Off-Broadway: *Goldstein*. Select regional: The Repertory Theatre of St Louis: *Angels in America, Part 1 and 2*; The Guthrie: *Indecent*; Pioneer Theatre Company: *Oslo*, *Lifespan of the Fact*; Arena Stage, Baltimore Center Stage, Kansas City Rep: *Indecent*; Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park: *Mothers and Sons*; The Arden: *Passion*; Utah Shakespeare Festival (four seasons): *Henry V*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Tempest*; Milwaukee Repertory Theatre: *Route 66*, *Life Could Be a Dream*, *The Andrews Brothers*; Delaware Theatre Company: *The Nerd*, *10 Months*. Television: “The Following,” “Smash,” “I Love You...But I Lied.”



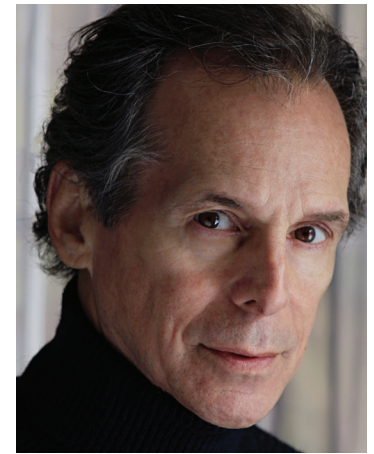
**LAURA J. HALL** (Tory) returns to PTC for her fourth mainstage production. Other PTC productions include *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, *Something's Afoot*, *A Christmas Carol: The Musical*, and the Play-By-Play reading of *The Fifth Domain*. She made her Broadway debut in *Wonderland*, toured with Diane Paulus' revival of *Pippin*, and has worked regionally at Sacramento Music Circus, Gateway Performing Arts Center, Adirondack Theatre Festival, and Weathervane Theatre. Back in New York, Hall frequently collaborates with composers, lyricists, and playwrights in developing new work. TV: “The Blacklist,” “Shades of Blue,” and “The Today Show.” Hall is also the proud co-founder of Uproar Theatrics, a new theatrical licensing company.



**VINCE MCGILL** (Ray) returns to PTC. He appeared in 2019's *Sweat*. He has also appeared on stages across the country, including the Dallas Theater Center, The Barter Theatre, ZACH Theatre, Shakespeare Dallas, Lyric Stage, and the African American Repertory Theater. Favorite roles include Brucie in *Sweat*, Harmon Wilks in *Radio Golf*, Floyd Barton in *Seven Guitars*, Walter Lee in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Othello*. Awards include Best Actor in both Austin and Dallas, Texas.



**ELIZABETH RAMOS** (Ana) returns to PTC having previously appeared as Mary Bennet in *Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley*. She also read in PTC's 2018 Play-by-Play Series *Art & Class*. Off-Broadway: *Then They Forgot About the Rest* (INTAR); *The Idea of Me* (Cherry Lane Theatre); *A Month in the Country* (Classic Stage Company). Regional: *Native Gardens* (Gulfshore Playhouse); *Tiny Beautiful Things* (Long Wharf Theatre); *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (Two River Theatre); *Fade* (TheaterWorks). Television credits include “Law and Order: SVU” and the upcoming horror-comedy feature film *STAG* directed by Alex Spieth.



**T. RYDER SMITH** (Jule) Previously at PTC: *Much Ado About Nothing*. Broadway: *Oslo*, *War Horse*, *Equus*. Off-Broadway: world premieres by Sarah Ruhl, David Greenspan, Christina Masciotti, Katori Hall, Richard Foreman, Anne Washburn, Romulus Linney. Regional theater: world premieres of *Salome*, *Big Love*, *Creditors*, *We Are Pussy Riot*, and *Scenes from Court Life*. Film/TV: *The Report*, “Bull,” “Hunters,” “Instinct,” “The Blacklist,” “White Collar,” the PBS series “The Abolitionists,” and *Brainscan*. Experimental films by Daniel Fish, Marie Losier, and Lawrence Krauser. Vocal: “The Venture Bros.” TV series, the “Bioshock” video games, and numerous audiobooks. Upcoming: feature film *Ikonophile Z*; the hinge collective film *SOR*; Rachel Rose's installation/film *Enclosure*.