

The Sneeze

Drama by Neil Simon

Based on a story by Anton Chekhov

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML9-880

Who makes you **LAUGH?**

COMMON CORE

RL 10 Read and comprehend
dramas.

Whether it's your best friend or a professional comedian, who makes you laugh—*really* laugh? What does this person do that you find so funny? If you get a kick out of ridiculous characters bumbling into trouble because of their out-of-control bodily functions, you'll love "The Sneeze."

QUICKWRITE Think about the last time you succumbed to helpless laughter—the kind that makes you gasp for breath and clutch your stomach. What set you off? Create your own top-ten list describing the things and the people you find funniest.



Meet the Authors

● TEXT ANALYSIS: FARCE

A **farce** is a humorous play that prompts laughter by presenting ridiculous situations, comic dialogue, and physical humor—in this case, an enormous sneeze. Often, the purpose of a farce is simply to keep the audience laughing. However, sometimes the writer of a farce has the goal of poking fun at someone or something in particular. To spot a farce, look for

- absurd plots driven by humorous conflicts
- exaggerated behavior and language
- characters who often exhibit just one comic trait or quality
- clever wordplay, word choices that include puns and double meanings
- physical comedy

As you read “The Sneeze,” think about how it exhibits these conventions. Note situations or characters that you find especially funny.

● READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZE

When you **visualize**, you use details, description, and dialogue to create mental images of what you read. Visualizing this play can help you monitor your understanding of it and enjoy its humor. Try the following:

- Read the stage directions to get a mental picture of the setting and actions taking place.
- Pay attention to the narrator’s description of the other characters. Do you get an image of how they might look and behave?
- To help you picture the characters, try mentally casting your favorite comedic actor in the lead role.
- Use your own imagination and sense of humor.

As you read, keep track of the details that help you visualize different aspects of the play.

<i>Details from the Text</i>	<i>My Visualization</i>
<i>“He is in his mid-thirties, mild-mannered and unassuming.” (lines 4–5)</i>	<i>I picture a timid-looking, boring man with a pale, slightly anxious face.</i>



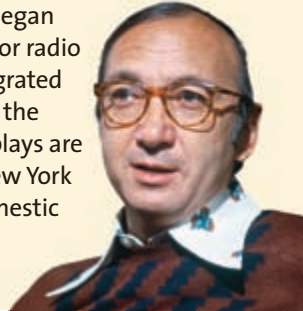
Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Neil Simon

born 1927

Popular Playwright

Neil Simon, one of America’s most popular dramatists, was born on the 4th of July in New York City. He began writing comedy sketches for radio during the 1940s, then migrated to television and finally to the theater. Most of Simon’s plays are set in his hometown of New York City and deal with the domestic problems of middle-class Americans.

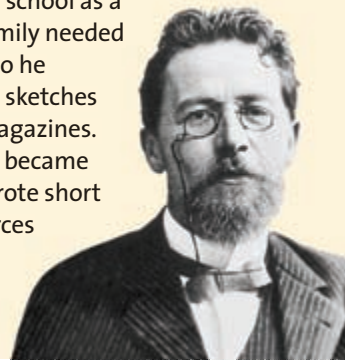


Anton Chekhov

1860–1904

Russian Master

One of his country’s greatest authors, Anton Chekhov was born to a poor family in Russia. He enrolled in medical school as a young man, but his family needed his financial support, so he began writing comical sketches and selling them to magazines. Writing, not medicine, became his career. Chekhov wrote short stories and one-act farces before turning to the full-length plays that made him a legend.



BACKGROUND TO THE DRAMA

A Team . . . Sort of

Neil Simon’s *The Good Doctor* is a series of dramatic sketches based on Chekhov’s stories. The sketches are tied together through the character of the Writer, who reveals his ideas for stories to the audience. “The Sneeze” is one of those sketches. Simon has jokingly referred to Chekhov as “my non-consenting collaborator.”



Authors Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML9-881

THE SNEEZ

NEIL SIMON

FROM THE GOOD DOCTOR

BASED ON A STORY BY ANTON CHEKHOV

Writer. If Ivan Ilyitch Cherdyakov,¹ a civil servant, a clerk in the Ministry of Public Parks, had any passion in life at all, it was the theater. (*Enter Ivan Cherdyakov and his Wife. He is in his mid-thirties, mild-mannered and unassuming. He and his Wife are dressed in their best, but are certainly no match for the grandeur around them. They are clearly out of their element here. They move into their seats. As his Wife peruses her program, Cherdyakov is*
 10 *beaming with happiness as he looks around and in back at the theater and its esteemed audience. He is a happy man tonight.*) He certainly had hopes and ambitions for higher office and had dedicated his life to hard work, zeal and patience. Still, he would not deny himself his one great pleasure. So he purchased two tickets in the very best section of the theater for the opening night performance of Rostov's *The Bearded Countess*.² (*A splendidly*
 20 *uniformed General and his Wife enter, looking for their seats.*) As fortune would have it, into the theater that night came His Respected Superior, General Mikhail Brassilhov,³ the Minister of Public Parks himself.

(*The General and his Wife take their seats in the first row, the General directly in front of Cherdyakov.*)

Cherdyakov (*leans over to the General*).
 Good evening, General.

General (*turns, looks at Cherdyakov coldly*).
 30 Hmm? . . . What? Oh, yes. Yes. Good evening.
 (*The General turns front again, looks at his program.*)

Cherdyakov. Permit me, sir. I am Cherdyakov . . .
 Ivan Ilyitch. This is a great honor for me, sir.

General (*turns; coldly*). Yes.

Cherdyakov. Like yourself, dear General, I too
 serve the Ministry of Public Parks . . . That is to say,
 I serve *you*, who is indeed *himself* the Minister of
 Public Parks. I am the Assistant Chief Clerk in
 40 the Department of Trees and Bushes.

General. Ahh, yes. Keep up the good work . . .
 Lovely trees and bushes this year. Very nice.

1. **Ivan Ilyitch Cherdyakov** (ē-vān' īl-yēch' chērd'yə-kəv).

2. **Rostov's *The Bearded Countess***: a made-up author and play.

3. **Mikhail Brassilhov** (mē'kā-ēl' brās'īl-əv).





(*The General turns back. Cherdyakov sits back, happy, grinning like a cat. The General's Wife whispers to him and he shrugs back. Suddenly the unseen curtain rises on the play and they all applaud. Cherdyakov leans forward again.*)

Cherdyakov. My wife would like very much to say hello, General. This is she. My wife, Madame

50 Cherdyakov.

Wife (*smiles*). How do you do?

General. My pleasure.

Wife. My pleasure, General.

General. How do you do?

(*He turns front, flustered. Cherdyakov beams at his Wife; then*)

Cherdyakov (*to the General's Wife*). Madame Brassilhov—my wife, Madame Cherdyakov.

Wife. How do you do, Madame Brassilhov?

60 **Madame Brassilhov** (*coldly*). How do you do?

Wife. I just had the pleasure of meeting your husband.

Cherdyakov (*to Madame Brassilhov*). And I am my wife's husband. How do you do, Madame Brassilhov?

(*The Writer "shushes" them.*)

General (*to the Writer*). Sorry. Terribly sorry.

(*The General tries to control his anger as they all go back to watching the play.*)

70 **Cherdyakov.** I hope you enjoy the play, sir.

General. I will if I can watch it.

(*He is getting hot under the collar. They all go back to watching the performance.*)

Writer. Feeling quite pleased with himself for having made the most of this golden opportunity, Ivan Ilyitch Cherdyakov sat back to enjoy *The Bearded Countess*. He was no longer a stranger to the Minister of Public Parks. They had become, if one wanted to be generous about the matter,

80 familiar with each other . . . And then, quite suddenly, without any warning, like a bolt from a gray thundering sky, Ivan Ilyitch Cherdyakov reared his head back, and—

Cherdyakov. AHHHHHHHH—

CHOOOOOOOOO!!! (*Cherdyakov unleashes a monstrous sneeze, his head snapping forward. The main blow of the sneeze discharges on the back of the General's completely bald head. The General winces and his hand immediately goes to his now-*

90 *dampened head.*) Ohhh, my goodness, I'm sorry, your Excellency! I'm so terribly sorry!

(*The General takes out his handkerchief and wipes his head.*)

General. Never mind. It's all right.

Cherdyakov. All right? . . . It certainly is *not* all right! It's unpardonable. It was monstrous of me—

General. You make too much of the matter. Let it rest.

100 (*He puts away his handkerchief.*)

Cherdyakov (*quickly takes out his own handkerchief*). How can I let it rest? It was inexcusable. Permit me to wipe your neck, General. It's the least I can do.

(*He starts to wipe the General's head. The General pushes his hand away.*)

General. Leave it be! It's all right, I say.

Cherdyakov. But I splattered you, sir. Your complete head is splattered. It was an accident,

110 I assure you—but it's *disgusting*!

Writer. Shhhh!

General. I'm sorry. My apologies.

Cherdyakov. The thing is, your Excellency, it came completely without warning. It was out of my nose before I could stifle it.

Madame Brassilhov. Shhhh!



Cherdyakov. Shhh, yes, certainly. I'm sorry . . .

(He sits back, nervously. He blows his nose with his handkerchief. Then Cherdyakov leans forward.) It's not a cold, if that's what you were worrying about, sir. Probably a particle of dust in the nostril—

General. Shhh!

(They watch the play in silence, and Cherdyakov sits back, unhappy with himself.)

Writer. But try as he might, Cherdyakov could not put the incident out of his mind. The sneeze, no more than an innocent anatomical accident,⁴ grew out of all proportion in his mind, until it resembled the angry roar of a cannon aimed squarely at the enemy camp. He played the incident back in his mind, slowing the procedure down so he could view again in horror the infamous deed.

(Cherdyakov, in slow motion, repeats the sneeze again, but slowed down so that it appears to us as one frame at a time. It also seems to be three times as great in intensity as the original sneeze. The General, also in slow motion, reacts as though he has just taken a fifty-pound hammer blow at the base of his skull. They all go with the slow motion of the "sneeze" until it is completed, when the unseen curtain falls and they applaud. They all rise and begin to file out of the theater, chattering about the lovely evening they have just spent.)

General. Charming . . . Charming.

Madame Brassilhov. Yes, charming.

General. Charming . . . Simply charming. Wasn't it charming, my dear?

Madame Brassilhov. I found it utterly charming.

(Cherdyakov stands behind them tapping the General.)

Writer. I was completely charmed by it.

Cherdyakov *(still tapping away at the General).*

Excuse me, Excellency—

General. Who's tapping? Somebody's tapping me. Who's that tapping?

Cherdyakov. I'm tapping, sir. I'm the tapper . . . Cherdyakov.

Madame Brassilhov *(quickly pulls the General back).* Stand back, dear, it's the sneezer.

Cherdyakov. No, no, it's all right. I'm all sneezed out . . . I was just concerned about your going out into the night air with a damp head.

General. Oh, that. It was a trifle. A mere faux pas. Forget it, young man. Amusing play, don't you think? Did you find it amusing?

Cherdyakov. Amusing? Oh, my goodness, yes. Ha, ha. So true. Ha, ha. I haven't laughed as much in years. Ha, ha, ha . . .

General. Which part interested you the most?

Cherdyakov. The sneeze. When I sneezed on you. It was unforgivable, sir.

General. Forget it, young man. Come, my dear. It looks like rain. I don't want to get my head wet again.

Madame Brassilhov. You shouldn't let people sneeze on you, dear. You're not to be sneezed at. *(They are gone.)*

Cherdyakov. I'm ruined! Ruined! He'll have me fired from Trees and Bushes. They'll send me down to Branches and Twigs.

Wife. Come, Ivan.

Cherdyakov. What?

Wife. You mustn't let it concern you. It was just a harmless little sneeze. The General's probably forgotten it already.

Cherdyakov. Do you really think so?

Wife. No! I'm scared, Ivan.

4. **innocent anatomical accident:** A biological act over which Cherdyakov had no control.



Writer. And so they walked home in despair.

190 **Cherdyakov.** Perhaps I should send him a nice gift. Maybe some Turkish towels.

Writer. Cherdyakov's once-promising career had literally been blown away.

Cherdyakov (*as they arrive home*). Why did this happen to me? Why did I go to the theater at all? Why didn't I sit in the balcony with people of our own class? They love sneezing on each other.

Wife. Come to bed, Ivan.

Cherdyakov. Perhaps if I were to call on the
200 General and explain matters again, but in such a charming, honest and self-effacing manner, he would have no choice but to forgive me . . .

Wife. Maybe it's best not to remind him, Ivan.

Cherdyakov. No, no. If I ever expect to become a gentleman, I must behave like one.

Writer. And so the morning came. It so happened this was the day the General listened to petitions, and since there were fifty or sixty petitions ahead of Cherdyakov, he waited from morning till late,
210 late afternoon . . .

(Cherdyakov *moves into the office set*.)

General. Next! . . . NEXT!

Cherdyakov. I'm not next, your Excellency . . . I'm last.

General. Very well, then . . . Last!

Cherdyakov. That's me, sir.

General. Well, what is your petition?

Cherdyakov. I have no petition, sir. I'm not a petitioner.

220 **General.** Then you waste my time.

Cherdyakov. Do you not recognize me, sir? We met last night under rather "explosive" circumstances . . . I am the splatterer.

General. The what?

Cherdyakov. The sneezer. The one who sneezed. The sneezing splatterer.

General. Indeed? And what is it you want now? A *Gesundheit*?⁵

Cherdyakov. No, Excellency . . . Your forgiveness.
230 I just wanted to point out there was no political or antisocial motivation behind my sneeze. It was a nonpartisan, nonviolent act of God. I curse the day the protuberance formed itself on my face. It's a hateful nose, sir, and I am not responsible for its indiscretions . . . (*grabbing his own nose*) Punish that which committed the crime, but absolve the innocent body behind it. Exile my nose, but forgive me, your kindness. Forgive me.

General. My dear young man, I'm not angry with
240 your nose. I'm too busy to have time for your nasal problems. I suggest you go home and take a hot bath—or a cold one—take *something*, but don't bother me with this silly business again . . . Gibber, gibber gibber, that's all I've heard all day. (*going offstage*) Gibber, gibber, gibber, gibber . . . (*Cherdyakov stands alone in the office sobbing.*)

Cherdyakov. Thank you, sir. God bless you and your wife and your household. May your days be sweet and may your nights be better than your days.

250 **Writer.** The feeling of relief that came over Cherdyakov was enormous . . .

Cherdyakov. May the birds sing in the morning at your window and may the coffee in your cup be strong and hot . . .

Writer. The weight of the burden that was lifted was inestimable . . .

Cherdyakov. I worship the chair you sit on and the uniform you wear that sits on the chair that I worship . . .

260 **Writer.** He walked home, singing and whistling like a lark. Life was surely a marvel, a joy, a heavenly paradise . . .

5. *Gesundheit* (ge-zöont'hit'): German for "good health," this term is often used after someone sneezes.



Cherdyakov. Oh, God, I am happy!

Writer. And yet—

Cherdyakov. And yet—

Writer. When he arrived home, he began to think . . .

Cherdyakov. Have I been the butt of a cruel and thoughtless joke?

270 **Writer.** Had the Minister toyed with him?

Cherdyakov. If he had no intention of punishing me, why did he torment me so unmercifully?

Writer. If the sneeze meant so little to the Minister, why did he deliberately cause Cherdyakov to writhe in his bed?

Cherdyakov. . . . to twist in agony the entire night?

Writer. Cherdyakov was furious!

Cherdyakov. I AM FURIOUS!

280 **Writer.** He foamed and fumed and paced the night through, and in the morning he called out to his wife, “SONYA!”

Cherdyakov. SONYA! (*She rushes in.*) I have been humiliated.

Wife. *You*, Ivan? Who would humiliate *you*? You’re such a kind and generous person.

Cherdyakov. Who? I’ll tell you who! General Brassilhov, the Minister of Public Parks.

Wife. What did he do?

290 **Cherdyakov.** The swine! I was humiliated in such subtle fashion, it was almost indiscernible. The man’s cunning is equal only to his cruelty. He practically forced me to come to his office to grovel and beg on my knees. I was reduced to a gibbering idiot.

Wife. You were that reduced?

Cherdyakov. I must go back and tell him what I think of him. The lower classes must speak up . . . (*He is at the door.*) The world must be made

300 safe so that men of all nations and creeds, regardless of color or religion, will be free to sneeze on their superiors! It is *he* who will be humiliated by *I*!

Writer. And so, the next morning, Cherdyakov came to humiliate *he*.⁶

(*Lights up on the General at his desk.*)

General. Last! (*Cherdyakov goes to the General’s desk. He stands there glaring down at the General with a faint trace of a smile on his lips. The General looks up.*) Well?

310 **Cherdyakov** (*smiles*). Well? Well, you say? . . . Do you not recognize me, your Excellency? Look at my face . . . Yes. You’re quite correct. It is I once again.

General (*looks at him, puzzled*). It is you once again who?

Cherdyakov (*confidentially*). Cherdyakov, Excellency. I have returned, having taken neither a hot bath nor a cold one.

General. Who let this filthy man in? What is it?

320 **Cherdyakov** (*on top of the situation now*). What is it? . . . What is it, you ask? You sit there behind your desk and ask, What is it? You sit there in your lofty position as General and Minister of Public Parks, a member in high standing among the upper class and ask me, a lowly civil servant, What is it? You sit there with full knowledge that there is no equality in this life, that there are those of us who serve and those that are served, those of us that obey and those that are obeyed, those of us who bow and those that are bowed to, that in this life certain events take
330 place that cause some of us to be humiliated and those that are the cause of that humiliation . . . and still you ask, “WHAT IS IT?”!

General (*angrily*). *What is it?* Don’t stand there gibbering like an idiot! What is it you want?

6. **humiliated by** / . . . **humiliate he**: Cherdyakov uses an incorrect pronoun, and the Writer mimics him.



Cherdyakov. *I'll tell you what I want! . . . I wanted to apologize again for sneezing on you . . . I wasn't sure I made it clear. It was an accident, an accident, I assure you . . .*

340 **General** (*stands and screams out*). *Out! Out, you idiot! Fool! Imbecile! Get out of my sight! I never want to see you again. If you ever cross my line of vision I'll have you exiled forever . . . WHAT'S YOUR NAME?*

Cherdyakov. Ch—Cherdyakov!

(*It comes out as a sneeze in the General's face.*)

General (*wiping himself*). You germ spreader! You maggot! You insect! You are lower than an insect. You are the second cousin to a cockroach! The
350 son-in-law of a bed bug! You are the nephew of a
ringworm! You are nothing, nothing, do you hear me? . . . *NOTHING!*

(*Cherdyakov backs away, and returns home.*)

Writer. At that moment, something broke loose inside of Cherdyakov . . . Something so deep and vital, so organic, that the damage that was done seemed irreparable . . . Something drained from him that can only be described as the very life force itself . . . (*Cherdyakov takes off his coat. He*
360 *sits on the sofa, head in hands.*) The matter was over, for once, for all, forever. What happened next was quite simple . . . (*Cherdyakov lies back on the sofa.*) Ivan Ilyitch Cherdyakov arrived at home . . . removed his coat . . . lay down on the sofa—and died! (*Cherdyakov's head drops and his hand falls to the floor.*)

Blackout

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Where does the opening scene of the play take place?
2. **Summarize** How does the General react when Cherdyakov sneezes?
3. **Recall** Why does Cherdyakov go to see the General in his office the next morning?
4. **Clarify** How does the play end?



RL 10 Read and comprehend dramas.

Text Analysis

5. **Visualize** Review the chart you filled in as you read. Which scene or situation in the play were you able to picture most vividly? Write a short paragraph describing the details. If you'd like, create a sketch to accompany your paragraph.
6. **Draw Conclusions** What is the role of the Writer in "The Sneeze"? Explain the function he performs, citing evidence to support your answer.
7. **Analyze Farce** Using a chart like the one shown, record examples of ridiculous situations, exaggerated behavior or language, and physical comedy that appear in "The Sneeze." Neil Simon uses these conventions of a farce to make fun of something. What in particular does he seem to be mocking?

<i>Ridiculous Situations</i>	<i>Exaggerated Behavior/Language</i>	<i>Physical Comedy</i>
• •	• •	• •

8. **Identify Dramatic Irony** Dramatic irony occurs when the audience (or the reader) knows more information about a character or a situation than the characters themselves know. Find an example of dramatic irony in the play, and explain what makes it ironic.

Text Criticism

9. **Author's Style** Neil Simon has said, "My idea of the ultimate achievement in a comedy is to make a whole audience fall onto the floor, writhing and laughing so hard that some of them pass out." Did he accomplish this goal with "The Sneeze"? Cite evidence from the play to support your opinion.

Who makes you LAUGH?

What did you find funniest about "The Sneeze"?