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"Plaza Suite," which opens tonight (Thursday) on the Morgan Stock Stage at Monterey Peninsula College, will be the 11th Neil Simon play the MPC Theatre Company has produced.

Eight of the 11, including the current show, have been directed by theater department co-chair Peter DeBono.

What's the deal with Neil? "He's an interesting kind of a writer. He started in the '60s with all that kind of straight comedy," said DeBono. Simon carved out space on Broadway with shows like "The Odd Couple" and "Barefoot in the Park." But after a while, drawing on his one-liner background wasn't enough. Eventually, without leaving comedy behind, he found success writing more seriously. "'Plaza Suite' is the beginning of it for me," said DeBono.

The play is made up of three acts that all take place in Suite 719 of the Plaza Hotel and illuminate various stages of marriage and relationships.

The original 1968 Broadway show, opening with an ironic wink on Feb. 14 of that year, starred George

C. Scott and Maureen Stapleton in each of the three acts. They played the couple on their wedding anniversary watching how far (down) they've gone since their big day; they played the movie producer and the old high school girlfriend; and the Act III couple wooing their betrothed daughter out of the locked bathroom to send her down the aisle on her chilly feet.

DeBono had made the choice to cast three separate couples for the show, but fate intervened and a late family issue for one of the actors brought him closer in step with historical precedents.

James Brady (seen most recently in MPC's "Kiss Me Kate") will play in Acts I and II. The actor says it won't be hard for the audience to switch gears.

"These two characters are so different from their core, from the ground up, distinguishing them is very, very easy," he said.

In Act I he is Sam, a man denying he's having an affair who allows his wife Karen (Teresa Del Piero) to drag him back to the same room where they once honeymooned.

In Act II, Brady takes on the persona of Jesse, the movie producer with something to prove, meeting with his old flame Muriel, now a married woman with children. Muriel (Jennifer Muniz) isn't wholly surprised by his ulterior motives.

At first glance and with the disservice of summary, these two men don't appear super likable.

"It depends on how you feel about mid-life crisis," Brady said wryly. "It depends on how you feel about men acting out when they turn 50, which is interesting because I turned 50 a week ago.

"I would like to hope that there are some

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sympathetic characteristics to them."

In addition, said the actor, "(Jesse) is usually played as kind of sleazy, but that's not the direction we're going with him.

"You can interpret him as someone who's genuine. I just think that it's a much more interesting choice."

"I think he's really suffering. I think he's really in need of this woman from his past."

Act III stars a name that usually shows up behind the scenes — Gary Bolen, who shares the theater department chair position with DeBono.

"Gary likes to act," DeBono said with something not unlike wonderment. "He still has that acting bug.

"I got to a certain point where it wasn't an enriching experience," he explained of his own professional aspirations. "I get more of that from my teaching and my directing."

This is the fourth show he's directed his colleague in. He says he is very fortunate to be able to hire a peer who comes from the same school of thought on theater and teaching.

Bolen plays the father of the bride opposite Denise Guarneri as his wife, two that will do whatever it takes to get their daughter (Taylor Thorngate) from calling off her wedding. Their interactions hint at a few things the bride may be fearing once she commits to wedded bliss.

Act I is the longest of the bits and the most serious. "I hope that people will understand that by the time they get to Act III it's all out farce," Brady said. "Stick around for Act III because you will be laughing."

"He just yo-yos the audience back and forth,"

DeBono said of the playwright's pull on emotions.

One might think there would be other Simons out there, writers coming up in the ranks who balance life's painfully funny universals in a similar style. But for DeBono, that's not necessarily the case. "As far as young writers, I would be stumped at that. Neil Simon is just tapping a vein that no one has been able to duplicate to me."

"He's the most successful playwright in theater history. He outdoes even Shakespeare, I think," the director said. "There's a Neil Simon play being done somewhere in the world every night."

MPC will do its part for a three-week run before passing the baton on closing night May 18.

Kathryn Petrucci can be reached at montereybound@yahoo.com . GO!

THEATER OPENING ·What: Monterey Peninsula College Theatre Company presents Neil Simon's "Plaza Suite" ·Where: Morgan Stock Stage, Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey ·When: Opens at 7p.m. Thursday, May 8; continues at 7p.m. Thursdays, 8p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2p.m. Sundays through May 18 ·Tickets: \$18 in advance, \$25 at the door, seniors \$20, young adults (20 and under) \$15, children under 12 \$10, available by calling 646-4213 from 3-7p.m. Wednesday-Friday or online at www.ticketguys.com ·Information: 646-4213 or www.mpctheatreco.com

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