From Jocks and Nerds: Men's Style in the Twentieth Century by

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Throughout the 1950s, Charles Atlas gave the skinny kid hope that he might transform himself from nerd to hero of the beach through a regimen of exercise. Atlas invented the term "ninety-seven pound weakling" to characterize the man seeking a future of facility and a good physique.

ABOVE: Advertisement for Charles Atlas, Ltd. c. 1955.

The nerd has risen from opprobrium to style supremacy. A fabrication of the 1950s, he has been transmogrified from vilified style outcast to paragon of advanced clothing. No hero in the postwar years, he rose to stardom in a suite of films appropriately called *Revenge of the Nerds*, in 1984 and 1987, and was the hero of an eponymous Broadway play, in 1987. American society, once facile in its abnegation of the nerd, has embraced him with zeal and approval. The role of the nerd has shifted from that of slide-rule-toting proto-scientist to savvy computer specialist, possessed of a knowledge all might envy. What he knows, no longer thought arcane, is now the way of the world. And with the computer's technological triumph, the nerd has been insinuated into the world. His once notorious indifference to daily life, giving others proper cause for criticism and ostracism, has come to an end; with his assimilation into contemporary society, the shunning of the nerd (and his shunning of the world) is no longer viable. And the fashion complement to these sociological changes is this: the characteristics of his style that once were most depreciated have been reevaluated, demonstrating the way in which perception creates and alters fashions in clothing and appearance.

The etymology of "nerd" is not certain, but some have associated it with "nerts," a polite form of "nuts," an expletive dating from the 1920s or '30s, according to Eric Partridge. Mortimer Snerd, the dim-witted character created in 1939 by the ventriloquist and radio entertainer Edgar Bergen, is also a possible source. Nerd describes someone foolish, ineffectual, unsophisticated, socially inept, physically awkward, and even, as one dictionary added in 1973, an "unpleasant date." Nerd describes a style that was unmitigatingly disparaged from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the earlier decade, Alfred E. Neuman, freckled paladin of *Mad Magazine*, represented for the junior-high audience the amiably risible characteristics of the nerd. Although unkempt and unattractive, he was to some a hero. In a decade when common goals were conformity and success, he was the eighth-grade version of the outcast as hero. His defiant "What, me worry?" cognition, so lacking in human intuition and interaction, was to his audience courageous. Because male style roles tend to originate in adolescence, the nerd image, too, is initially formulated at puberty. It is a period when the adolescent undergoes a kind of rite of passage and chooses his role under the strident circumstances of impolite, unsublimated, painfully cruel youth.

The nerd has had many incarnations, but some general characteristics can be identified. The nerd is physically clumsy and lacks the grace of the star athlete—thus the simple dialectic of jock and nerd. The nerd is physically undeveloped, a variant of what Charles Atlas referred to as "the ninety-seven pound weakling" who gets sand kicked in his face on the beach. Further, the nerd is physically impaired. His awkward frame, his lanky hair, and his too-big or too-little teeth, eyes, nose, and mouth only exaggerate the irregularities of his style. If the model in a fashion editorial for the Italian magazine *Per Lui* (March 1986) were judged by conventional standards, his prominent teeth, narrow eyes, bushy eyebrows, and glasses would make him a most unlikely candidate for high fashion.

Such physical characteristics are exacerbated by another important trait of the nerd; he does not know how to present himself (nor how to secure his own physical comfort). When looking for warmth, he wears a sleeveless sweater, paradoxically leaving him with overheated chest and chilly extremities. He wears a short-sleeved shirt in a clinging, synthetic material, which only adds to his physical discomfort. A further note in this ill-fated wardrobe is the shirt buttoned to the collar but worn without a tie. In the 1950s, closing the top button of the shirt—a closure without function—was a coded signifier of the nerd; it was a denial of casualness in the decade of the casual. The distinctive nerdiness of the button phenomenon could only have occurred at a moment when collar buttons were customarily left open. Today the gesture has the power of a style statement because it is in opposition to the popular mode. Paradoxically, one has to be uncool to be really cool.

The nerd, oblivious to comfort and to a certain extent reliant upon the word of his ("yeeks!") mother to dress him, is a study in contradictions. The nerd would wear pants that are too short, suggesting a lack of self-assessment or a failure to look in the mirror. And the quintessential device of the nerd is the plastic pocket protector, or "nerdpak," a proletarian contraption that allows a pocket to be stuffed with pens, pencils, rulers, and slide rules or calculators. The assertively professional packing of this equipment would differentiate the nerd from the "big man on campus," the cool, self-sufficient, Levi's-wearing *bricoleur*, who has a single pen or pencil in his pocket sufficient to all needs. The nerd is the obsessive technocrat, filling his pockets with the job-specific equipment of contemporary proficiency.

In 1985, *Life Magazine* listed twenty-two identifying characteristics of the nerd: short haircut (receding hairline, large-domed forehead?); corrective lenses mended with adhesive tape (nearsighted?); rear-view mirror (on glasses); arrested case of acne with computer-terminal burn; goofy, toothy smile; generic T-shirt; pajama-print short-sleeved shirt (permanent press, bought by Mom?); plastic pocket guard (containing pens, plastic comb, eyeglass-cleaning papers, and air-pressure gauge); digital watch; belt cinched at the thorax; emergency pen carrier (suspended from waistband); Canon printout calculator (the neo-slide rule); embarrassing fly; computer traveling case; Hostess Cup Cakes; bag lunch (tuna fish on white, corn chips, Sno Balls); three-speed bike with bell, basket, and book clip; printout; unaffectedly short trousers (from high school); pants-leg clips; socks with heels worked down under the arches; and brown shoes. The image as viewed by *Life* is hardly beguiling, but the genuine article is even more elaborate. Other characteristics might include a clashing, notably unsuccessful pattern mix; a cap with visor that shifts to the sides or rear; and the omnipresent glasses, not only broken and mended with adhesive tape but also ill-fitting and tending to slide down the face, emphasizing irregular features, as well.

Glasses are appropriate for the nerd not only because they signal the failure of his body to function in the seemingly invulnerable jock mode but because they hold an almost iconic power; glasses are what the bully pulls off in his taunts; glasses are what slip off at the water fountain; and in their distortion of the eyes, glasses create a focus on the pain of the nerd. The nerd style evokes sympathy. One readily distinguished the nerd in the 1950s, a decade when winners seemed clearly differentiated from losers. The awkwardness, lack of internal and external ease, and signs of social marginality served to make the nerd an ideal pariah. The added insult of spiky hair, indifference to proper bathing and hygiene, and the ubiquitous trail of paper from the shoe seemed to qualify the nerd for a lifetime of opprobrium.

In the 1980s, however, the nerd has returned trailing not scraps of paper but glory. In an issue of the magazine *Elle* (March 1988), fashion writer Kathleen

Rock-and-roll singer Buddy Holly dressed in a conservative style for his performances in the 1950s, but his self-assured look provided a model for the spectacles-wearing adolescent.

RIGHT: Buddy Holly. c. 1958. Photographer: James J. Kriegsmann. Courtesy

Italian fashion took the nerd to the beach in 1986. Fumbling and inept, inappropriately dressed (even in designer clothes), he makes a two-handed catch in a game of frisbee, one of the few nerd sports in its use of a plastic disk and absence of team play. The young man in a buttoned-up shirt with no tie, also from Italian fashion, sports the toothy smile and dark-rimmed glasses of the nerd. In mid-decade, an American magazine found the nerd phenomenon so compelling, above, that it set out to identify his characteristics, beginning with his black-framed glasses, short pants, and plastic pocket liner.

OPPOSITE: *Shirt by Omonimo; pants by Josma; boots by El Charro. Fashion editorial published in* Per Lui, *Milan, June 1986. Photographer: Frédérique Veysset. Courtesy Edizioni Conde Nast S.p.A.* OPPOSITE TOP: *Shirt by Alito. Fashion editorial published in* Per Lui, *Milan, March 1986. Photographer: Mario Testino. Courtesy Edizioni Conde Nast S.p.A.* ABOVE: *"Can you spot the 14 identifying features of this yuppie and 22 of this nerd?" Published in* Life, *New York, January 1985. Photographer: Mark Kozlowski. Courtesy Time Inc.*

ing: "Dork, spaz, geek, creep, nerd. When we were kids, we sneered at them. Or worse, feared we were one of them. But today their high-water pants, white socks, clunky black shoes, and thick glasses are everywhere. Irony of ironies, the look of the moment is the look most of us tried hard to avoid while were growing up. Take heart, nerds, your fifteen minutes are here."

To be sure, the nerd has always been capable of transformation. In the comic strips, Clark Kent, wearing dark-rimmed glasses, could step into a telephone booth and emerge as Superman; by sending away for the Charles Atlas kit, the scrawny child could guarantee that hereafter no one would again kick sand in his face. Perhaps bravado masculinity has always been the alter ego of the nerd, even though sensitivity and vulnerability would have been more immediately apparent.

There have been nerds in the arts as well as in technology and the sciences. The conservative image of rock-and-roll singer Buddy Holly, whose brief career ended in 1959 when he died in a plane crash, was in extreme opposition to the glittering, ostentatious styles of many performers of the day. As Stephen Fried, a writer for *GQ*, recalled: "Jet black frames were for geeks and Buddy Holly fans," an identification of style with the plaintiveness of the music, perhaps; that association was not lost on subsequent musicians, such as Elvis Costello and Buster Poindexter, in the 1980s. But the preeminent nerd exemplar is the filmmaker and actor Woody Allen, whose disheveled elegance and protean creative talent identify the nerd aspiration. Even as Allen has appropriated many traditional garments, such as Oxford-cloth shirts with button-down collars, his use of the fashion materials has placed them in the sympathetic context of the nerd style.

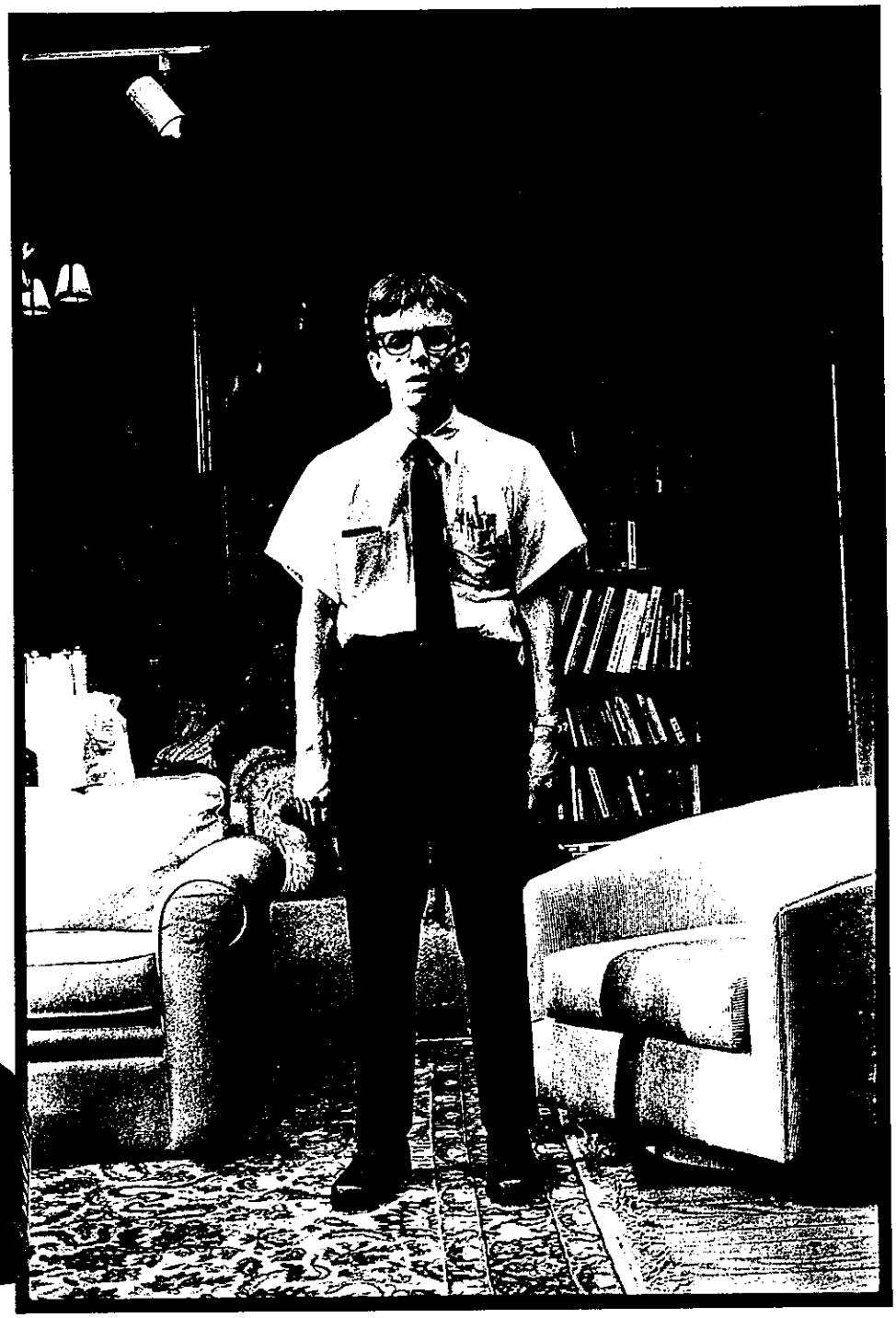
Woody Allen's style followers are legion. Although some might believe that he reached supremacy only in *Annie Hall* (1977), where the Ralph Lauren clothing he selected for his star, Diane Keaton, instantly created a style, his personal impact is more substantive and sustained than that of his heroine. Among his progeny are the style-aware students of the vanguard Paris fashion school, Studio Berçot. Assembling outfits from their own designs as well as from ready-to-wear clothing, they emulate the nerd through such assimilated appearances as high-water pants, heavy shoes, oversized garments, and large, black glasses. At an antic extreme is a solicitation for the trendy journal *PAPER* (1984), which is clothed in the stereotype of a toothy, unkempt nerd. The person least likely to have been invited to the teen party of the 1950s is the celebrant and the celebrated figure several generations later. Likewise, a liqueur, La Grande Passion, in an advertising appeal to the style conscious, portrays the Clark Kent-style nerd in a St. Vitus dance of business success, passion for work, and a combination of the fun and the serious.

If the nerd's lack of agility had ostracized him from the games of the 1950s, he played with a new definition of dexterity in the 1980s. In June 1986 a fashion feature for *Per Lui*—which is directed, one presumes, at young men who would not yet have been born in the 1950s—brings the overdressed nerd to the edge of the water, his feet neither bare nor casually shod but wearing street shoes so ungainly as to force him to catch the frisbee with two hands rather than one. Muscle beach has manifestly been replaced by geek beach. It is the triumph of the nerd in the most unlikely of places—in the fashion magazine and at the seaside, where physical prowess had hitherto prevailed and the nerd, in prior generations, had been terrorized. The improbability of this triumph is made more apparent by examining the lineage of our hero.

The sad, struggling figure played by Jerry Lewis in a film called *The Patsy* (1964) wore the awkwardness and dress of the nerd. Lewis followed a long tradition in comedy of presenting a type in ill-fitting clothing and spectacles, his bearing ungainly, his behavior without finesse. Some twenty years later, however, the nerd has been more sympathetically incarnated as Pee-wee Herman, the children's comedian and cult hero, an underdog of physical limpness wearing too-tight suits. His passive-aggressive manner lends the nerd role a goofy, harmless demeanor, also realized in the character of Hornby K. Fletcher, a "Rent-a-Nerd" created in New York by actor Mike McDonald in 1987. Like others in the national organization of nerds, whose membership is open to all craving the collective identity of nerd, Hornby K. Fletcher is lovable, a figure to be welcomed, not shunned. Recognizing the transformation of the image, advertising as well as fashion has thus turned to the glorification of the nerd.

The nerd has also become a sexual creature, vulnerable and feeling, a perfect partner because he is not only concerned with himself. In the film *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), a young woman commends one of the characters on his sexual performance, and he reminds her that nerds don't spend their spare time in self-centered exercising to keep themselves muscular; they think about sex. A male counterpart to Cinderella, the nerd blossoms in a seductive relationship with a woman.

In the 1980s, creatures in the nerd image may still wear their glasses



The nerd was lionized in the 1980s. Pressed into service in promoting a liqueur and a magazine, he would also figure as the central character in a play. Filmmaker Woody Allen, whose wit and style gave the awkward young intellectual in dark-rimmed glasses hope for romance and even fame, was the nerd exemplar. Even young students from the Paris fashion school Studio Berçot would wear

OPPOSITE TOP: Advertisement for La Grande Passion Liqueur. 1987. Photographer: Richard Pandiscio. Courtesy PAPER *Publishing Company.* OPPOSITE CENTER: *Woody Allen. 1969. Photographer: Philippe Halsman. © 1989 Yvonne Halsman.* OPPOSITE BOTTOM: *Fashion students from the Studio Berçot, Paris. Published in* Accent, *Paris, Winter 1987. Photographer: Scott Osman. Courtesy the photographer.* ABOVE LEFT: *Advertisement for* PAPER Magazine.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Robert Joy stars in the 1987 play* The Nerd. *Photographer: Gerry Goodstein. Courtesy the photographer.*

times. The nerd look was brought to high style in mid-decade, and what would have seemed unacceptable ten years before was now found to be in the vanguard. The apotheosis of the nerd may be the natural consequence of the waning physical culture of recent years. Perhaps the stock-market decline of October 1987 has underlined the failure of bravado masculinity in business and renewed the need for brains and acumen. When primacy is given to intelligence over the body, the nerd is logically drawn from the forlorn, marginal limits, to which he was restricted in the 1950s, to the very center of the stylistic imagination, as in the 1980s.

Is the nerd as indifferent to style as the 1950s might have imagined? Or, alternatively, is the nerd style an astutely ironic look at fashion? The extremes of style definition that the nerd has achieved suggests a greater self-consciousness than was heretofore ascribed to him. Perhaps nerd styles are like the brief efflorescence of Oxford bags in 1925–26, when wide white pants were a fad in men's clothing of England and the

Pee-wee Herman, who devised a television personality in the 1980s that combined boyish exuberance with fastidiousness and propriety, dresses in a suit that is too small, emphasizing his man-child quality.

OPPOSITE: Pee-wee Herman. Published in Actuel, *Paris, June 1987. Photographer: Xavier Lambours. Courtesy the photographer.*

A French fashion magazine for men has added to the nerd's lineage, at left above presenting him in dandified cummerbund and ascot and at right casting him for a part in *Tom Brown's School Days*, where he would be marked for ostracism in his high-water pants, circular dark-rimmed glasses, slicked-down hair, and thick-soled shoes.

ABOVE LEFT: Jacket by Façonnable; shirt with cummerbund by Jean-François Charles for Piero Pauchetti. Fashion editorial published in Vogue Hommes International, *Paris, Fall–Winter 1987–88. Photographer: Kim Knott. Courtesy Publications Condé Nast S.A.*

ABOVE RIGHT: Suit by Jean Paul Gaul Garçons. Fashion editorial published in Vogue Hommes International, *Paris, Fall–Winter 1987–88. Photographer: Kim Knott. Courtesy Publications Condé Nast S.A.*

United States. Exaggerations and irony prevailed in clothing that was purposely ridiculous. Indeed, nearly sixty years later, in 1984, the musician David Byrne, himself a nerd hero, created the big suit in an instinctive reflection of Oxford bags and a cognitive appreciation of oversizing in men's clothing. Byrne, the intelligent hero, is no less a nerd style figure than Buddy Holly had been, but his sanctioning of the style is an extreme gesture of individuality, as well.

There is a Walter Mitty dream in everyone. There is also a Superman beneath the unassuming guise of the nerd, who is both the sympathetic everyman and the supreme expression of style as its own victory.

The cult of the nerd reached such proportions in 1987 that a second film called *Revenge of the Nerds* was released, and a party service called "Rent-a-Nerd" came into being. Michael Boodro, an observer of the social scene, wrote in *Express* in the spring of 1983: "The new style instills power and strength into the weakest and most despised stereotypes, the wimp, loser, and nerd, by resuscitating their paraphernalia." Almost Old Testament in his moralizing vengeance, he found this new disposition of nerd to be without style change but with revised style values.

ABOVE: Robert Carradine stars in Revenge of the Nerds II: Nerds in Paradise. *1987. Photographer: Zade Rosenthal. Courtesy Twentieth Century Fox. ABOVE RIGHT: Mike McDonald as "Rent-a-Nerd." Published in* People, *New York, May 25, 1987. Photographer: Kevin Horan. Courtesy Time Inc.*

Larry Shue and Theatrical Farce

Larry Shue is one of the few American playwrights of recent years to work principally in the farce form. Two of the three full-length plays he wrote are created in the specific comic form. Had he lived, he might have made a major contribution to this theatrical form, which would have been a significant achievement for an American playwright in the latter half of this century.

Farce Elements to look for in *The Nerd*

1. **Disguise and silly costumes**--several characters dress up in the course of the play. This is a standard farce convention in the theatre.

2. **Mistaken identity**--the central character is the subject--and the perpetrator--of several instances of mistaken identity. Listen for characters mistakenly calling each other by wrong names and confusion over the pronunciation of names.

3. **Hiding**--this is a basic idea of physical comedy, particularly when a door is opened and someone unexpected enters.

4. **"Pie in the face"**--although no actual pies fly in *The Nerd,* there is much comedy based around food items and throwing food on people.

5. **Inanimate objects rising up against human beings**--there are jokes revolving around falling in the mud, falling down steps, a near-miss plane crash as well as stories about absurd animal antics--anything that puts humanity in its place can be turned to comic effect

6. **Humans finding themselves in unfamiliar environments**--this is a standard farce convention because unfamiliarity breeds comic situation as the stranger must accomodate--or in the case of the nerd, *not* accomodate--the new environment.

7. **Music and dance**--a frequent element in farces, music is incorporated into *The Nerd* in the silliest of manners--a tambourine solo, a girl who plays harp and piano at the same time, song titles like "I Lost My Baby To the Great Big Train," and many other musical jokes abound in the play.

8. **Stock comic characters**--just like in Commedia dell'arte, *The Nerd* uses standard comic types: the miserly father, the comic sidekick, the trickster, and the love interest couple.

9. **Slapstick comedy**--comic violence of any kind: kicked shins, poked eyes--many of the three Stooges bits are evidenced in the play

Why Do We Laugh?

Today you will witness behavior on the stage that—were it to take place in your home—would drive you crazy. You will observe a friendship that—were you to have such a friend—would undermine you faith in mankind. And you will watch disasters unfold that—were they to befall you—would crush your resolve to go on living. Such is the effect a nerd has on normal human beings.

Fortunately, none of the events in *The Nerd* will happen to you. You're in the audience. You get to sit back and watch as a nerd upsets his friend's life by wrecking his career, interfering with his relationships, and neraly transforming him into another nerd. And the more desperate the action gets, the funnier the play becomes.

Reviewing for the *New Yorker* in 1987, Edith Oliver concurred with the majority opinion of *The Nerd*'s Broadway premiere: "The late Larry Shue, sterling dramatist that he was, demonstrated in *The Foreigner* that the primary purpose of farcical comedy is to provoke laughter. His *The Nerd* fulfills this purpose . . . the laughter, and not only my own, being practically unceasing." But if a nerd is, well, nerdish, why do we laugh? And is the laughter that Shue's comedy sparks improtant enough to merit our attention in these "serious" times?

In response to this first question, we cite the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who wrote: "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings." This description fits the title character of *The Nerd* to a "T." Well-intentioned and innocent though he may be, the nerd is oblivious to social norms and manages to irritate, provoke and offend at the same time.

But why, when the nerd pulls these incredible stunts, do audiences giggle, chuckle and guffaw? According to Bergson, "It is part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream." That part of our laughter aims to corrent the nerd's anti-social tendencies. Paradoxically, another part of our laughter celebrates the nerd's anarchic independence. As in the chaotic comedy of the Marx brothers, there is something delgithful in the havoc and destruction brought on by the nerd.

Perhaps even more important—and in response to the second question above—is the belief that laughter can be a redemptive force in these "serious" times. Quoting from L. J. Potts' book, *Comedy*: "Wit and humor can bridge the deepest intellectual and even emotional chasms; they can create, if only for a moment, the completest harmony between men." So for a brief time in the theatre, Shue's comedy allows us to forget our differences, to lower our defenses and to share a laugh.