

From Guignol to a Grand Guignol: Death and the Puppeteer

Philip Roth: *Sabbath's Theater*
Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995

In the land of the free, everybody should have the right to fight their battle with death their own way. Morris Sabbath's way, however, is not acceptable for the society he lives in, despite its claim to the epithet "the land of the free." Who is to blame? Sabbath, the arthritic Marquis de Sade epigon, the pathetic and painfully aging puppeteer? Or the politically correct America of the nineties that has taken it upon itself to rewrite the nation's moral and ethical code?

To get to the answer, one must burrow through America's hill of broken dreams, disintegrating social fabric and plagues of urban diseases - and in the meantime, sit back and enjoy the show at *Sabbath's Theater*, a bitter and hilarious morality play which won Philip Roth the 1995 National Book Award. Coming on the heels of 1994 winner William Gaddis's *A Frolic Of His Own*, - a work similarly social-minded and concerned with a nation sinking into mental regression - the award seems to signify the critics' preference for

this particular trend of the American novel in the mid-nineties.

Reviewers have been quite divided over Roth's twenty-first novel that finally won him the award he had been nominated for several times. Rather surprisingly, the political side of the novel has often been downplayed: while Sabbath's theater boasts of a stage upon which aspects of a particular social phenomenon parade up and down insistently enough to comprise an exhibition labelled "These Politically Correct United States," it has frequently been dismissed as a negligible backdrop to Sabbath the Sodomite's well-deserved descent to hell. We beg to differ.

Morris Sabbath of the title is a Jew with an Irish Catholic nickname, Mickey, who also goes by the suggestive sobriquet "Country." Born after the Great Depression, having lived through great social upheavals, Sabbath arrives at the end of his life only to be rejected and reviled for values instilled in him by society. He is boisterous, promiscuous,

adulterous, eloquent, loud, insufferable, impulsive - in short, an entertaining character. He is also a bygone (?) male ideal: adventurer, artist and Don Juan. He took to sea at the age of seventeen, visited all the whorehouses up and down the shores of the Americas, he was a street artist and theater director in New York and, according to his self-contrived epitaph, lived the life of a "whoremonger, seducer, sodomist."

He is the embodiment of all things politically incorrect: "abuser of women, destroyer of morals, ensnarer of youth," to quote more of the same epitaph. So much so that he smacks of being the Devil himself, as clearly insinuated by Roth. Sabbath will have none of the insipidness of the "kinder, gentler" America of the nineties, which, in its turn is willing to have none of him. The confrontation between this late but uninhibited incarnation of the dead pagan god Pan and the politically correct America of the nineties can only result in severe harm to somebody.

From an early age, Sabbath had been dogged by death and spent a lifetime escaping it. Now, at the age of sixty-four, he is penniless, jobless and, after leaving his wife, homeless. He consequently sallies forth into the world he had abandoned long ago - to find and face his death. But his Rip Van Winkle adventure goes all wrong and in vain does he totter through a series of farcical disasters. Life doesn't want him. Death doesn't want

him. And whatever it is that America has become in his absence, it certainly doesn't want him.

This holier-than-Sabbath world strives for impeccable morality but seems to be mired in too much death and destruction. Sabbath is treated to a grand guignol-style exhibition of its realities: his wife is recovering alcoholic, and his few remaining friends are all on the anti-depression drug Prozac. One of them commits suicide, an act that serves as a leitmotif in this tale: Sabbath's wife, his father-in-law, his ex-producer and a casual acquaintance had all tried suicide at one time, with more or less success and it is in their footsteps that Sabbath endeavors to follow.

However it is not the visibly, demonstrably ill that is ultimately wrong with the world surrounding Sabbath. They are only symptoms but not the disease. The real affliction is a stealthily, sinisterly evolving force, a way of thinking and behaving, a diverse mental attitude often blanketed by the term "political correctness." It is like a horde of termites, which invade a piece of wooden habitat, deprive it of its inner substance, render it hollow and brittle and susceptible to any passing band of marauders, however metaphorical. It is a disease infecting the American mind, preparing the soil for depression, alcoholism, suicide and other mental disorders.

In this sense, *Sabbath's Theater* is a very interesting successor to *A*

Frolic Of His Own in which Gaddis depicted the individual's plight in a culture where responsibility has lost its meaning and gave way to a world of blame-shifting and finger-pointing. Roth's characters do not turn to the law in search of scapegoats but delve into their own past to find the culprits for their misery. Sabbath is stunned when he visits his wife in the sanitarium. He knows he is largely responsible for ruining her life: taking her away from her life, driving her into alcoholism, womanizing and disgracing her by his scandalous behavior. After all this, after she had been through a nervous breakdown, a suicide attempt and a detoxication program, she claims to have found the root of all her problems: she blames her father whom she (falsely) accuses of molesting her!ⁱ Sabbath is stunned by this mentality, which his wife's fellow patient satirizes amply: "... they've been trying for three weeks to get me to turn in my dad. The answer to every question is either Prozac or incest."

Roseanna Sabbath's breakdown was a result of years of decline, but it was actually triggered by a scandal that constitutes another item in Roth's "These Politically Correct United States" exhibition. Sexual harassment and molestation are issues that have been dividing public opinion, never ceasing to be in the forefront of a national debate. Obviously, it was only a matter of time and opportunity that the incorrigible womanizer

Sabbath should become a target of a politically correct witch-hunt.

Sabbath, a one-time college professor, was fired from that last job of his life or sexually molesting a college student.ⁱⁱ Unquestionably, he had it in him to do just that - by a quirk of fate, however, he was chastised for something he didn't do. It is in the nature of the confrontation that Sabbath be "nailed" not necessarily for what he does but for what he is. It was the dean of the college (a genuine PC piece: a female/feminist ethnic academic) who put the girl up to "talking dirty" with him on the phone, tape-recording the conversation and subsequently making the tape public.

The dean happens to be Japanese and when Sabbath sinks his teeth into this fact, his alleged victim accuses him of being a racist.ⁱⁱⁱ And true: Sabbath does hate the Japanese. His beloved brother was shot down in the war by the Japanese over the Philippines, destroying him and his family: his mother never recovered from her grief and he became obsessed with death and the memory of his brother. Sabbath has been brought up to hate the Japanese. He was told his brother died a hero's death helping his country defeat the imperialistic Japanese - the same people who are now buying up the biggest American companies. But he is not allowed to have personal history, personal feelings, only the party line where a negative opinion of

a non-white person constitutes racism and must be persecuted.

In fact, it is party lines and ideology that he is surrounded by wherever he looks, but none so threatening to his person as the tenets of feminism, especially those of the militant right of that movement.^{iv}

"Fascism. Communism. Feminism. All designed to turn one group of people against another group of people. The good Aryans against the bad others who oppress them. The good poor against the bad rich who oppress them. The good women against the bad men who oppress them. The holder of the ideology is pure and good and clean and the other is wicked," rants one character and Sabbath nods in agreement.

But the threat is more than merely ideological: when his wife receives news of a Virginia woman who dismembered her husband and got away with it^v, Sabbath develops a morbid fear of cutting objects. It is the fear of losing his manhood that finally drives him away from his home, into the world he detests, to face the thing he had been running from all his life: his death.

When he returns after a series of disasters, ready to accept his fate, he finds his wife in bed with another woman. There follows one of the most delightful and concentrated scenes of the novel, as he jumps through the window into the bedroom where the two are making love. Dressed only in an American flag and

a patriotic yarmulke, he starts beating his chest and hooting, barking, roaring like a frenzied male gorilla.

A question unavoidably rises at this point: Is *Sabbath's Theater* nothing but that frustrated howl, let loose when all the eloquence had already failed? Is it, as one character put it, the "discredited male polemic's last gasp," an intelligent piece of anti-PC propaganda?

The answer, after a brief consideration, must be an emphatic 'no.' Roth has managed to sidestep the mire of controversy and avoid the pitfall of becoming embroiled in a national debate over ethics and morality. He has stayed outside of that brawl and achieved this remarkable feat with the cunning use of the central metaphor of the novel, the "theater" of the title.

The "theater" may be interpreted on a delightfully good number of levels, but most pertinent to the issues above is the way the novel identifies with the purpose of theater, that is, to entertain and not to indoctrinate, to present and not to argue. Roth manages to create the effect of this theater and avoid propagandizing chiefly by using a "shifting perspective," populating the stage with over-complex characters and frequently indulging in self-satire.

The "shifting perspective" is a simple enough device, but needs a masterful touch so as not to come across as clumsy. Roth provides precisely that and presents characters

as seen by themselves and others, events as filtered through opposing views, relationships as experienced by everybody involved and so on. This in turn, allows the reader to see Sabbath as a grand prolocutor of a noble cause, a dirty old man, a rebel-hero, an aging, pathetic Don Juan, an uninhibited hedonist, a complete failure - and the list could go on. Even Sabbath himself has multiple views of his personality, especially during periods of breakdowns: he is at once experiencing an event and observing that experience - the puppet and the puppeteer at the point where the puppeteer is no longer in control. Similarly all other characters and events are presented as multi-faceted and seen from many angles, as if in a hall of mirrors.

Such a device and approach gives birth to characters who are complex to the point of being self-contradictory. And not only Sabbath is drenched in ambiguity: Drenka, his mistress, is presented as an angelic whore; his friend, Norman, as the successful producer, well-meaning friend and Prozac-eating lifeless eunuch; Roseanna as victim and spineless blame-shifter and so on. To a certain, sometimes unconscious level, everybody is deceitful even if they don't want to deceive.

Finally, if everyone has a place on this stage of Sabbath's theater, the author also claims the right to be present as directly as the others. Roth's own voice (the puppeteer's

voice from behind the screen) becomes at times audible through somebody's words^{vi} as if to ridicule the gravity of his own statements and remind the audience that this is only entertainment.

What, then, is the real significance of Sabbath and his inability to get out of this mutually unhappy relationship with life?

Perhaps it is precisely the fact that the man seems to get lost amid the political agendas, while silently, desperately fading into the background. In the midst of all the controversy, something is being passed over, perhaps missed entirely. Beyond the platitudes, social clichés, polemic and heated debates, death looms larger and more incomprehensible - Sabbath the man, pathetic and helpless, is losing the battle.

He is the control-minded puppeteer who is baffled by the concept of passing, the ultimate in uncontrollability, and even more devastated by death in his own brother. He has staked his existence on taking big gulps of life - how could he then kill himself? At the same time, suicide beckons - he considers every other kind of death a personal failure. He hates the world and knows the feeling is not unrequited - still he cannot go.

Is his fate a generational tragedy? It is too early to say. If *Sabbath's Theater* is a polemic, it is that in the Orwellian sense of negative utopias.

Sabbath may or may not be the last great white male - but he is a tragic figure. Just not tragic enough to die.

Death then, at least for the time being, leaves the Puppeteer alone. But the reader had witnessed a fascinating transformation, one of the theater itself - what had been a stomping ground for Guignol, the quick-witted, boisterous puppet, the Lyonnais Punch, has become a stage for a Grand Guignol, a theater of horror, complete with the requisite madness, incest, haunting and suicide. How could this happen?

ⁱ Unlike Gaddis's presentation of America's mental maladies, Sabbath's Theater adheres very closely to current events, presumably on the premise that since these "true stories" were predominantly displayed by the media therefore helped to shape the nation's consciousness on these issues. In the most famous court case involving "blame-shifting" Lyle and Erik Menendez were charged with murder for the August 1989 shotgun slayings of their parents in the family's Beverly Hills mansion, where they practically slaughtered their parents in a most bestial way. The prosecution claimed the motive was greed as the brothers stood to inherit \$14 million. The defense claimed the shootings were an act of self-defense in a desperate attempt to escape years of childhood family violence and sexual abuse. The jury was unable to come to a unanimous decision and mistrial was declared

in January 1994. The case is currently being retried.

ⁱⁱ There have been a number of notorious cases in which university professors were attacked for behavior allegedly constituting sexual harassment. Donald Silva, teaching a writing class at the University of New Hampshire, used several sexual metaphors to describe good writing. Six female students filed formal sexual harassment charges. The university found against him and ordered him to apologize, fined him \$2000, and gave him a formal reprimand. They also required him to attend counseling sessions with a university approved therapist. Later, a federal judge found that the university violated Silva's constitutional rights to free speech. In another case, renowned psychology professor James B. Maas of Cornell University was charged with "overfriendly behavior," "sexual innuendo" and "sexual assault." This latter charge was an unsubstantiated accusation that Professor Maas touched a female student on the breast six years prior to the case. In 1994, a university disciplinary committee found that while not a single charge could be substantiated against him, Professor Maas "in effect" committed the violations. Details were leaked to the press, destroying the professor's reputation.

ⁱⁱⁱ The girl actually asks him "Why must you be so racially prejudiced against Japanese?" - caricature PC-speak (where one cannot say "blind" to describe the "visually challenged") turned upside down: in her muddled mind she identifies racism as a bad thing, but bad things must not be said of people, so a racist must be called "racially prejudiced."

^{iv} Also known as Segregationist Feminists or, derisively, "Feminazis." Their thoughts are propagated in such works as Andrea Dworkin's "Intercourse" or Valerie Solanas' "S.C.U.M. (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto." They maintain that now, that science has found the way to artificial insemination, men have become superfluous. Their language is suffused with propaganda techniques Communist, Revolutionaries, Fascist and other professional indoctrinators have used in the

past. (Not without cross-references, either: Dworkin, for example, calls all men "National Socialists" and the women who love them "collaborators.") It is very interesting to note a feminist reaction to the novel. Amy Bloom, reviewer for the San Jose (California) Mercury News wrote, somewhat mystifyingly: "A novel so ferociously contemptuous of men, so deeply adoring of women, you'd think it was written ...by...Andrea Dworkin...Women get the best lines, the better lives, the biggest hearts and the sharpest insights. The passage [describing Sabbath's love for Drenka's middle-aged body] should be reprinted and pasted on every woman's mirror to make the world a better place..."

^v The reference here is to an actual case: A Virginia woman, Lorena Bobbitt, cut his sleeping husband's penis off and threw it out the window. She subsequently claimed that she attacked him after he had raped her and she was not responsible for her actions due to temporary insanity. In January 1994, a jury found that she was not guilty by reason of insanity and committed her to a mental facility for a 45 day (!) observation.

^{vi} Roseanna Sabbath's fellow patient delivers to Sabbath a long, extremely convincing argument on Roseanna's noble nature, ending with "... But she has as much nobility as someone can within the limits of her imagination." Sabbath replies: "How do you know she does?" And she says, and we may hear Roth ridiculing his own arguments in the novel: "I don't. I just made it up. I make it up as I go along. Doesn't everyone?"