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Bellow's latest novel

Sammler is not Herzog but it is worth reading

By DAVID McCAUGHNA

Saul Bellow's new and long-awaited novel, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, moves through the worldly-wise and dispassionate existence of Mr. Artur Sammler, an old, half-blind Polish Jew now living in the urban chaos of New York's Upper West Side.

Sammler has taken wisdom from his long, arduous life. Now, not far from death, he is resigned to the world. His wisdom shines through like a beacon of light that draws relatives to his side for advice and understanding.

As a London correspondent for a Polish paper during the 1930s Sammler immersed in the fashionable Bloomsbury literary circles and made acquaintance with greats like Virginia Woolf, George Orwell and especially H.G. Wells.

Sammler's harmlessly mad daughter who now shares an apartment with him feels that it is her father's crowning mission in life to write a memoir of his friendship with the prophet Wells. During the 40s Sammler and his wife were rounded up by the Nazis for extermination. His wife was shot dead but Sammler miraculously escaped with one eye shot up. Artur Sammler has travelled the long and weary

journey through life and now sits back and watches the world pass on, taking life as it comes; playing it by ear. His daughter's madness, the sexual adventures of his society-prone niece, his own observations and encounter with a flashy black pick-pocket. . . Mr. Sammler's planet moves slowly and resolutely on.

Looking upon the corpse of his brother, Sammler reflects: "He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet — through all the confusion and degraded clowning of his life through which we are speeding — he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it — that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know, we know." Like the peasantry in Faulkner, Sammler endures. Mr. Sammler's planet is, quite obviously, our planet too.

It's always a joy to read a new novel by a fine writer, and especially one as skillful as Bellow. And Mr. Sammler's Planet is finely wrought but it disappointingly lacks the intensity and power of Herzog. It is as if Bellow had diluted himself somewhat. Herzog was a grand and sensitive figure; the same power is not behind Sammler. And, then, the crisis of the male menopause is rather more interesting than the philosophical acceptance of old age.

There are a number of dreadful stereotyped characters that mar the novel; as if Bellow were reaching too far beyond his own realm of experience. The student protestor, who interrupts Sammler while he is lecturing at Columbia on the British intellectual coterie, is an example of one of the assinine cardboard characters that pass through the pages of the novel: "Orwell was a fink. He was a sick counter-revolutionary. It's good he died when he did. And what you are saying is shit." Turning to the audience, extending violent arms and raising his palms like a Greek dancer, he said: "Why do you listen to this effete old shit? What has he got to tell you? His balls are dry. He's dead. He can't come."

While in relation to Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet is an inferior effort, alone it stands as an excellent novel. As the prophets of the electric media predict the death of the novel it's good to have Bellow around writing best-sellers. His newest novel is much better written and far more honest than the highly overrated rambling of Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*. Roth is a Jewish novelist, Bellow has transcended that limitation.



Saul Bellow

Future of Canada's theatre is with young, vibrant groups

Theatre Passe Muraille is one of the vibrant small theatre companies which has sprung up in Toronto in the last year.

Along with the Studio Lab, Global Village and the more established Toronto Workshop Productions, Theatre Passe Muraille can be categorized by the dangerous and often-deceptive word 'experimental.' Toronto's own off or off-off Broadway; the only refuge from the second-rate companies that fill the Royal Alex and O'Keefe Centre with tired plays and musicals that proved lucrative in New York a few seasons back.

If anything theatrically stimulating ever occurs in this city, it happens in the small theatres like Passe Muraille.

Theatre Passe Muraille had had a short and turbulent history. It began as an arm of Rochedale College under the guidance of Jim Garrard. They had workshops and put on a few productions in a play called the 'Rochedale Garage.'

They put on Futz, a play originally produced by New York's famed La Mama troupe. The play concerns the love affair between a farmer and his pig, it also features some rude language and bare female bosoms. It was busted the Metro police.

The company then moved into a vast makeshift theatre in Trinity Square and have been putting on plays regularly since the fall. Garrard has quit the company which is now in deep financial difficulties with salaries slashed and the production schedule reduced. It is a sad old story and a common one among the smaller theatre companies who have tried to survive in this city.

While the future of Theatre Passe Muraille remains in limbo, it is currently presenting a twin bill of Sweet Eros and John Lennon's *In His Own Write*. The plays were to close on Feb. 21 but public response has been so good that the run has been extended until March 14.

The company certainly deserves any success but I strongly suspect that the popularity of the plays has little to do with the group's production but more with the magical combination of nudity and John Lennon.

One could hardly wish for a more with-it twosome. Sweet Eros, the first half of the evening, is a tedious little play about an abduction and quasi-rape. It's tremendously reminiscent of the novel and film *The Collector* of a few years back.

The essential point of the play is, I presume, that during its course the actress and actor strip entirely. In *In His Own Write* is an adaption of the John Lennon books that was commissioned by Laurence Olivier's National theatre of Great Britain.

If you've read either of the books then you are familiar with the puns and absurd Lennon wit. It's often quite clever and sometimes tiresome. But the Theatre Muraille actors are so flexible and exuberant that the play fairly shines. Really, not enough can be said about the young company whose spirit and inventiveness must be quite unique for the usually lugubrious Toronto stage.

If Canadian theatre is ever going to advance out of its currently dull and mangy state, the initial steps will be made by small companies like Theatre Passe Muraille. There is little hope with places like Stratford which yearly present the same dreary productions with monotonous regularity.

Jim Garrard, in an interview a few months ago, spoke of Theatre Passe Muraille's possible path: "The point is that the veneer of what, for lack of a better word, we call 'establishment' theatre, just isn't acceptable to most people who think at all today, to young people especially. And the veneer is only part of what's being ripped off. Everything is being pulled apart and challenged. What you have left may be nothing more than the guts and garbage of what we call theatre, but maybe that's where we have to start looking. Maybe that's why we're rummaging around in the shit."

Theatre Passe Muraille is a long way off from Grotowskian heights of the fiery iconoclasm of the Living Theatre but it's moving in the right direction and is certainly worthy of support from national cultural coffers which lavish money so profusely on the cultural bulwarks of this country. — D.M.C.

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