

# A New Book, Play Buoy Philip Roth

By HENRY RAYMONT

He strides toward an inconspicuous table in the back of the carpeted lounge of the Algonquin Hotel, seemingly confident that his tweedy appearance and bushy black mustache will go unnoticed in the plush Victorian setting.

Not that there is anything Victorian about Philip Roth, whose scatological humor has a way of becoming transmuted into award-winning books such as "Goodbye, Columbus" or big best-sellers like "Portnoy's Complaint." Yet, bold in language, he is afflicted by anguished shyness in public places.

Mr. Roth's passion for privacy is likely to be challenged by the first presentation of his work on Broadway tonight and a forthcoming book that marks his first literary sally into politics. The play is "Unlikely Heroes: Three Philip Roth Stories," at the Plymouth Theater; the political incursion is "Our Gang (Starring Tricky and His Friends)," a mordant satire about President Nixon to be published by Random House on Nov. 8.

## 'Kind of Comic Irony'

"The stories that the play is based on display a mild kind of comic irony," the 38-year-old writer said in an interview. "The book, on the other hand, deals with the political perversion of language with a strongly satiric kind of comedy."

Mr. Roth saw just one Broadway rehearsal ("it was quite good") of the dramatization of his three stories — "Epstein," "Defender of the Faith" and "Eli, the Fanatic." They are directed by Larry Arrick, former artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater and an old friend of the author.

"Our Gang," Mr. Roth's 200-page tragifarce, has been stirring up a furor among literati, Broadway producers and political writers, not to mention paperback publishers — Bantam Books has already acquired the re-

print rights. Some editors, however, have objected to the book because they found its portrayal of the President in bad taste.

"It goes without saying that it's in bad taste," Mr. Roth affirms, almost aggressively. "Anything with claws and teeth is in bad taste."

Lest there be any suspicion that "Our Gang" is a partisan satire, Mr. Roth cites a list of principals that spreads across the spectrum of both parties: In addition to President Trick E. Dixon there are the late Senatore Joseph McCatastrophy, the late John F. Charisma, Lyin' B. Johnson, Jacqueline Charisma Colossus and Mayor John Lancelot.

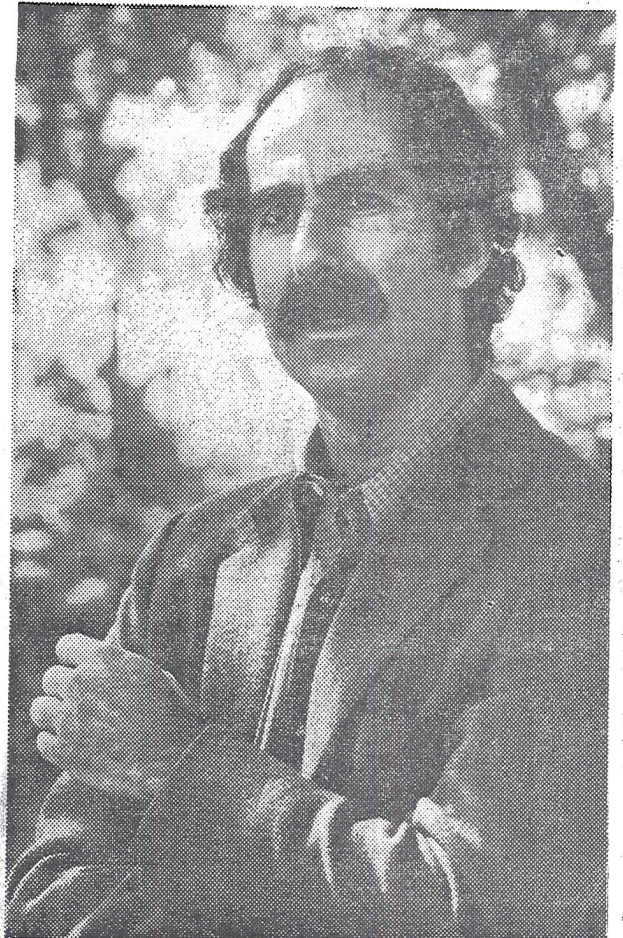
"What brought this book about was an irrepressible sense of moral indignation," the author continues. "Suddenly I felt a bubble of revulsion, a big bubble swelling up from the bottom of the sea."

## Public Statements Cited

There were, he explains, two public statements by Mr. Nixon last spring whose "hypocrisy" so offended him that he set aside a novel he is still working on in order to write "Our Gang" in three feverish months.

One was the President's defense of First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr. last March after the officer had been sentenced by a court-martial on charges of having murdered Vietnamese civilians at Mylai. The second was Mr. Nixon's statement on April 3 denouncing abortion as "an unacceptable form of population control" because "the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in the principles expounded by the United Nations."

"The discrepancy between these two statements became an irresistible satirical target," says Mr. Roth. "How could the President display such leniency over a verdict concerning the killing of civilians and then pretend such piety over 'the life of



Jill Kremenitz

Philip Roth

the yet unborn?" A dark frown crossed his youthful face. "It was the height of moral insensitivity," he said.

"President Nixon's reaction toward the Calley case reflects a widespread infantile attitude too many Americans display toward guilt, particularly in this war, as opposed to an adult attitude which would accept the possibility that Americans too can do wrong, that we are as fallible as other peoples."

The author is convinced that American letters are moving into a new period of biting political satire in the tradition of Mark Twain and James Russell Lowell. Indications of this trend, he says, are Gore Vidal's forthcoming play, "An Evening With Richard Nixon," the current satirical documentary film, "Millhouse," and a book of

political drawings by Philip Guston, the abstract artist, titled "Poor Richard."

Questioned about his political philosophy, Mr. Roth rejects any suggestion that, like Norman Mailer or Arthur Miller, he might become a political activist.

"I'm a writer, and whatever my political concerns are they are expressed in writing," he declares. "I'm not so silly as to believe that a work of political satire is going to change anything. I do think, however, that 'Our Gang' actually taps a great national feeling about Nixon. But it is not a political tract, it's a work of fiction, a political fantasy based upon real American political attitudes."

"The test of satire is whether it rings true. In fact it rings even truer because of fictionalized distortion. I didn't invent Tricky, he invented himself."