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A Conversation with Roger Scott Jackson

**Actor and Author: *Sam Singleton*
*Atheist Evangelist, Patriarchs and Penises***

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What have you got against God?

Do you mean me personally or Brother Sam?

Isn't it disingenuous for you to talk about Brother Sam as if he were an entirely separate person, as if you don't control everything he does and says?

I'm a writer and actor. You can no more fairly infer my beliefs from Sam Singleton's than Flannery O'Connor's from Hazel Motes's or Anthony Hopkins's from Hannibal Lecter's.

Sam, then.

Brother Sam blames the idea of God for all sorts of slights and indignities, personal and societal.

How are you and Sam different?

I'd prefer to talk about Sam. But I would certainly hope that I'm his near opposite in most respects. Sam conducts himself precisely as I've spent my whole life trying not to do.

Do you worry that people will get you and Sam mixed up?

Yes. Of course. Sam either doesn't understand or doesn't care that what he says, and the way he says it, can have a powerful effect on others. And since he's saying all sorts of things that are guaranteed to piss people off, I'd prefer to maintain a healthy distance between his beliefs and mine. But this can't be about my beliefs. Otherwise, why bother inventing a character in the first place? I could never portray anyone other than Roger Scott Jackson himself. No character I create could ever say something of which I didn't personally approve and with which I didn't agree, could never be anything but me in a funny suit.

Is Sam Singleton autobiographical?

No. But you write what you know. And I know the culture that produced Sam.

Where did Sam Singleton come from?

His character was cut from a novel I wrote and never published back in the 1980s. But, as will happen, he turned up in various pieces written in the intervening time. In 2007, I decided to work on an atheist evangelist show, an idea I'd been kicking around for years. Sam already had a whole back-story, so he was drafted. I was interested in what a man who was raised in a very strict Pentecostal environment, and subjected to years of what could be described as religious abuse, might have to say if he grew up to be an atheist preacher.

Aren't you concerned about appearing to share certain beliefs and attitudes with hate-mongers?

Any discussion of a work of fiction that confuses a character's point of view and the author's does a disservice to both the author and her or his audience. Sam is not speaking for me.

Aren't you adding fuel to the conflict between groups that are already struggling to get along?

Are you talking about intramural conflicts between the various sects, or conflict between believers and atheists? It's hard to imagine that *Patriarchs and Penises* could have any real effect on relations between Christians, Jews, and Moslems, since it doesn't favor one over the other. I suppose it could incite believers to treat their nonbelieving sisters and brothers even more shabbily, but that seems a little grandiose. And I don't think it likely that atheists will be moved to rise up in numbers against their friends and families and all the others who overwhelmingly believe in god.

Aren't you troubled that people will see the play as being personally disrespectful, as if you're going out of your way to "dis" their traditions and values?

Imagine a society in which fiction writers were allowed to put into the mouths of their characters only those words guaranteed not to offend anyone.

Aren't you afraid of making yourself a target for wackos?

Yes. And that stinks. There are a lot of angry, violent believers out there. The *Last Temptation of Christ*? *The Satanic Verses*? People get crazy when you talk about God, even in a work of fiction. And if that weren't bad enough, *Patriarchs and Penises* is satire. All satirists have to come to terms with making some people uncomfortable or angry and the fact that many just won't get it. Ask Randy Newman about *Short People*. It wasn't about, pardon the expression, the small population of short people, it was about the big population of bigots. Satire assumes a hierarchal relationship between the satiric voice and its target. It's OK for the workers to satirize the boss, but not for the boss to satirize the workers. Sam takes on the Abrahamic religions because they make up a majority, not of religions, but of the world's population. In America, majorities have a history of ignoring when they're the recipients of privilege.

What do you hope to accomplish by being so patently offensive.
Getting peoples' attention, getting them to examine their own attitudes.

Is Sam a bigot?

I created the character then left it for the audience to decide what drives him. Sam obviously worries that people will take his ridicule of these biblical personages as an attack on Jews, Muslims and Christians. He makes a clear distinction between making fun of what people believe and belittling their humanity. But Sam seems convinced that the same irrationality underlies all of those faiths and that bad things have grown out of that. Literarily speaking, he doesn't like some of the characters in the Bible. He's spent a lot of time with them, first as a believer, then as an atheist, and feels he knows them well enough to pass judgement. And Sam is very judgemental, a trait he shares with his biblical nemeses. He says in one of his tracts that he was born into a racist and anti-Semitic environment. He likens overcoming that to burrowing out of a hole. It's up to each member of the audience to decide how much progress Sam's made.

What about Sam's use of the term Abrahamite? Doesn't that sort of smell like a slur?

Sam explains that he needed a noun that covers all three of the religions that come from Abraham. The usual "Judeo-Christian" omits Islam. I understand that he chose Abrahamite because it sounded more "biblely" than some others. Abrahamist, for instance.

You don't seriously maintain that this play is anything but a gratuitously sacrilegious and deliberately offensive exercise in selling tickets, do you?

I made this play to make money. I hope millions of people buy tickets. But what Sam has to say ought to be heard and discussed. People may find him an obnoxious, boorish blowhard, but he raises serious issues in ways that, until now, no one has done. Each of us considers some subjects sacrosanct, off-limits for anything that even remotely resembles disrespect, let alone ridicule. Part of the satirist's job description is being prepared to trespass on someone else's sacred ground--always a risky and potentially unpopular undertaking, especially since the ones you're poking fun at likely outnumber you by about a zillion to one. Sam is suspicious of the sacrosanct and maintains that, though sacredness may have value, it does not itself confer value. He notes that the idea of racial purity is sacred to the Nazis and other idiots. (Sam's word)

Isn't Patriarchs and Penises just so much spiritual potty-talk?

Sam loves to cuss. You can definitely put him solidly in the camp of those favoring the epithet as attention-getter and verbal intensifier. Sam sees ridicule as a means of reducing big concepts to a human scale. He says, "cutting god down to size." And Sam is adamant about approaching the Bible as literature. He insists on telling its stories from his own perspective.

Why now?

The time is right for Brother Sam. Given the current interest in atheism, and the emergence of what Sam calls the “celebrity atheists,” I set out to interject some additional questions into the discussion. I have the advantage of not being a best-selling author with an income stream to protect and an orthodoxy to observe. One of those questions is, what do you do with someone like Brother Sam who’s angry and feels that the believing class is rubbing his nose in the marginalization that comes with being an atheist in America. Some of the ideas he expresses are doubtlessly shared by others in the nonreligious minority. If those ideas get a hearing, get discussed, Sam will have done his job.

What do have to say to those who simply don’t find the play to be in any way funny?

It’s absolutely true that funniness is purely subjective. And in the case of *Patriarchs and Penises*, the approach to the subject matter itself simply makes it impossible for some people to react in any way that isn’t negative. Whether it works, whether it succeeds at what I’ve set as its purpose, has less to do with how much people laugh during the show than with how much they talk about it on the way home.

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