

dupee or a duper—an improbable idealist who believes in this novel, with its mushy message about nuclear holocaust, or just another powermonger seizing an opportunity to establish herself in Hollywood? While Mamet may have deliberately failed to clarify these points, he also fails to convince us that Karen ever could have sold Bobby on the novel over Charlie's more commercially viable project. And *that* failure is simply poor dramatic construction.

Under Gregory Mosher's appropriately vulgar direction, both Mantegna and Silver give winning performances. But the production suffers from more than just Madonna's flat and uncomprehending delivery. Mamet's characteristic stammers and syntactical repetitions have by now become a device that detracts from the verisimilitude the playwright is after. The calculation is as obvious as the pretension of calling a 75-minute sketch with three scenes a three-act play. Pretentious too are the

massive red drapes in lieu of a more substantial set design. While the effect may be mistaken for art, it probably reflects Madonna's salary more than an aesthetic decision.

Aside from an implicit acceptance of Mamet's reputation, it's difficult to account for the reviewers' hospitable reception to *Speed-the-Plow*. It fails to capture the Hollywood personae with the depth and sustained character analysis that David Rabe achieved in *Hurlyburly*. It fails to evoke the insanity of working on a specific film that Jonathan Reynolds engendered in *Geniuses* (recalling his participation as an on-location writer in the making of *Apocalypse Now*). It doesn't even provide the succinct statement on today's movies that Lanford Wilson proffered as a throw-away line in *Burn This*, when an incidental character says, "Movies are some banker's speculation about how the American adolescents want to see themselves that week."

At best, what *Speed-the-Plow* offers

is a humorously cynical portrait of two lackey producers clawing their way up the studio ladder. But it does so by unleashing all of the stereotypes in and out of the industry—clichés suggesting that greed is the only motivation Hollywood tolerates, and vulgarity is the only style it knows.

With *Speed-the-Plow* as evidence, perhaps the worst comment on Agate's prophetic epigram is that in the process of trying to win back the audience from the movies, the theater would succumb to the tawdrier methods of the medium it sired. "If it's not quite art, [or] it's not quite entertainment, [then] it's here on my desk," says Bobby in the play's opening moments. What Mamet describes is also here now on Broadway, where it will remain at least as long as Madonna is in it.

David Kaufman writes from New York City.

## POP CULTURE

### The Grammys' Growl

by Gary S. Vasilash

It is encouraging to see that Michael Jackson is still capable of something more than Pepsi commercials. That he didn't pick up an award is, as many have suggested, a backlash against the success of *Thriller*. But the correlation is not as direct as it seems. The real problem is that Jackson is not the least bit reticent when it comes to enjoying his enormous success. He is the Malcolm Forbes of the music world: instead of collecting Faberge eggs and making grand tours on a motorcycle, Jackson builds a zoo in his backyard and travels with a monkey.

The rock industry likes to pretend that it is, if not quite penniless, at least as down-at-the-heels as its Reebok-wearing fans. Jackson's extravagance explodes this fiction, and his colleagues don't like him giving the game away. Major donations to the United Negro College Fund rather than to the Sandinistas don't help Jackson much,

either.

O Grammys, where was thy Sting? Or Paul Simon? Or Bruce Springsteen? Or Smokey Robinson? All were big winners: Best Pop Vocal, Male ("Bring on the Night"); Record of the Year ("Graceland"); Best Rock Vocal ("Tunnel of Love"); Best R&B Vocal, Male ("Just to See Her"). None showed.

Certainly, excuses can be made to explain their truancy. Sting, who has caught flack for mixing rock and jazz, obviously figured he wouldn't win. Simon's "Graceland" was Album of the Year last year, and he wasn't silly enough to think that a single of the same name would win in '88. The Boss, the Hulk Hogan of rock and roll, was out on the road with the real Americans and couldn't be bothered. Smokey had never won a Grammy before, so he undoubtedly decided to spare himself.

The only positive thing that can be said about this lack of participation is that it seems to indicate that there is no "\$64,000 Question"-style fraud involved: the winners had not been tipped off. Still, it makes me wonder how important the awards really are to those who receive them. A gold sticker on the disc package is nice, and there

are often Grammy winner specials at stores following the show, boosting sales. But as for the acknowledgment of one's peers, it doesn't seem to matter.

One scene with Bono, the singing scimitar of what *USA Today* calls the "social rockers" U2 (it sounds like new-wave tea dancing), was indicative. The singer, whose voice, views, and manner have a grittiness uncommon among the general run of today's musicians, talked about "soul" during his acceptance remarks for Album of the Year, *The Joshua Tree*. Bono noted that without soul, Prince would merely be a "song-and-dance man," and Springsteen just a "great storyteller." And U2: "We would probably be getting better reviews in *The Village Voice*, but . . ." and with that, Bono quickly jerked his gaze from the main floor crowd up to the balcony and said, somewhat penitently, "That's a joke." He lowered his head and muttered, "Sometimes they don't understand."

Although it would be inappropriate to make too much of this, it does seem evident—and odd—that the man who is so active in promoting Amnesty International, the organization that's against repressive regimes, would feel it necessary to make an apology for an

innocuous crack to the Powers at *The Village Voice*. Was he afraid that the paper would see to it that all U2 albums were pulled from the racks in New York before the start of business the next day? Well . . .

One of the more intelligent films by John Carpenter is *Escape From New York*. The movie posits that Manhattan, in the not-too-distant future, is turned into one big walled prison. Somehow, that seems about right.

New York had been without the Grammy ceremonies for 10 years, which makes sense, given the music industry's base in L.A. But since New York wanted the show, it spent a few hundred thousand dollars to get it. Certainly, there were financial

paybacks: restaurants holding post-awards parties must have made a bundle. And the guys in Washington Square would have seen an influx of heavy demand. But I really wonder if middle-American rock fans were saying, "Hey, all my favorite musicians went there—I will too!" before booking a seat on Northwest and a room in the Hyatt for a weekend of economy boosting in the Big Apple.

Despite the accounting that was faster than a street-side three-card monte game, Mayor Ed Koch was beaming in the front row at Radio City. Sitting next to him was Cyndi Lauper, the Betty Boop of the Boroughs, who was once not only the New Artist of the Year Grammy winner but

also something of a success. Fortune had turned. There she was, her hair peroxide blonde, her dress cut low enough to test the physics of the strapless gown. She looked like a burned-out actress hoping to win a few minutes on a casting couch.

If Carpenter made a movie of the affair—a *Return to New York*—he could cast Donald Pleasance as Koch and the ever-irrepressible Adrienne Barbeau as Lauper. (I vaguely recall hearing that Pleasance may be dead, but that wouldn't make any difference; he'd still be great in the role.)

*Vasilash is in tune in Detroit.*

## THE ACADEMY

### Schools Then and Now

by Thomas Molnar

The present agitation around Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, reminds me of the many similar debates I have witnessed in this country during the last four decades. At almost regular intervals the mediocrity of our system of education, from grade school to university, is demonstrated, denounced, deplored, and pilloried. Committees are set up which propose—the slogans hardly change—an "education for excellence," by which the pronouncements mean more millions of dollars, higher salaries for teachers, new divisions of the school year, and new methods of "motivating" students. All this for the greater glory of the textbook and audio-visual industry, the real beneficiaries of the reforms. Then, as soon as formulated, these reforms abandon the path of a genuine improvement (which is never envisaged anyway) and generate new ills, suspiciously like the old. The dialectics of solid mediocrity and false cure reminds one of Tocqueville's famous phrase, describing much of our public life and mood as an *agitated monotony*.

Prompted by these circumstances, I am tempted to remember my own years as a schoolboy and student, not to

compare (that would be futile) but to offer other educational postulates, themselves the products of other cultures and other human relationships. I use the plural because I went to school in three different countries—Hungary, Rumania, and Belgium. Different countries, yet sharing the tacit assumption: education concerns the mind and the traditional areas of knowledge, refined and enriched by every generation. It has nothing to do with the "well-rounded personality," "sociability," and "getting along," or with saving the world for this or that ism and utopian dream. Conduct, manners, and morals were left to other institutions—family, church, the circle of friends, military service. And there was something else very important: our attitude vis-à-vis teachers and professors who, merely by having authority in the social structure and value system, an authority not exchangeable for the small coin of personal friendship, let alone a first-name based pal-approach, were corporately respected. They possessed the knowledge to which we aspired. Some of them were our intellectual heroes, the others simply our betters.

I am not arguing that the reality was as ideal as this picture, but I insist that the young need to be surrounded by strong images and influences; not Freudian "father figures" which imply weakness in the young, but sources of respect and admiration. Our American students' basic and all-too-frequent mediocrity and lethargy can be ex-

plained as an outcome of hardly ever encountering personal or institutional strength. Hardly anybody displays excellence before them; all, from parent to dean to advisor, seek to flatter them, using the pseudo-pal system. Long before Bloom, Plato told the whole story.

The overall cultural message for us was excellence. I recently read a volume of Goethe's various writings and jottings, and it struck me that the ever-recurrent phrase is: superior mind, views of a high order, spiritual heights. These for Goethe were nouns and adjectives not in need of definitions. Enough of this mentality survived to the 1930's to remain the strongest current in the *gymnasias* and *lycées* that I attended for a total of eight years, in two countries. Let me not give the impression that we were intellectually standing at attention. True, in class we listened, hardly asked questions, and never "discussed" (I still believe this to be the best method), but we absorbed a great deal, then discussed—and ours were free and passion-filled conversations—at home, in coffee houses and pubs, and in endless strolls when two, three, four young students opened their souls, dreams, and whatever intelligence they had. Think of conversations in Dostoevsky's novels and you have it.

In class we learned, not in order just to acquire knowledge but to satisfy stern parental demands, avoid the prof's sarcasms, and to hold our own with competing fellow students. It oc-