

Americans of that continually). Thus Posner, when he sensed his own people flagging, could defend the insufferable Soviet emigration policy toward Jews (if there really is such a thing) by telling them (he certainly wasn't telling us) what he knows isn't true—that Washington's policy is the same for American citizens who want to emigrate to an "enemy" country.

That men are in a certain sense a creation of their political (as distinct from economic) systems was revealed anew when the Soviets simply could not understand our insistence on the importance of the right to dissent, to quarrel with our government and among ourselves. They were stumped by an idea like petitioning for change

and scoffed at the pickets they were shown marching in front of KING-TV. We Russians, one said, have no "need" to dissent, because everyone is in agreement with Soviet policy. And anyway, a woman retorted, "your government listens but doesn't hear."

But the most poignant moment came when a Seattleite asked what the Russian counterpart to the American Dream was. From Leningrad there came only puzzlement, a profound, uncomfortable silence. Even the gabby Posner was for once quiet. Then one remembered how Isaiah Berlin describes the product of modern totalitarianism: "individuals who never know or have forgotten what *douceur de vivre*, free self-expression, the infinite variety of persons and of the relationships between them, and the right

of free choice, difficult to endure but more intolerable to surrender, can ever have been like." A few Seattleites began to catch on. "They now seem more stereotyped than ever," a nurse said, "because they all said the same thing."

Would talking about fishing or bossy employers or alcoholism have helped erase this stereotype? Sure. The Americans then could have gone home satisfied that Russians are human beings too—"brothers under the skin." But they wouldn't have learned what they need to know most: the vast difference between the Soviet vision of the nature of man and his place in the cosmos, and ours. And only politics, Raymond Aron pointed out, can reveal this difference to us, because it "concerns not only our society but

ourselves. [Politics] is something fundamental through which each person asserts what he is and what he wants to become."

Herein lies the reason why the Seattle audience overcame their own blowzy sentimentalities, not to mention the producers', and injected hardball politics *in spite of themselves* into this people's summit: They could do no less, given that the whole idea was to "put human faces behind the superpowers." And the fact is, the moral values politics embodies are what we're all about, what gives us our human faces. If this can be the lesson gleaned from "A Citizens' Summit," then let's hope Phil Donahue and Vlad Posner put on more of them. We'll soon have fewer Americans asking why the cold war is still around. □

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



THE SHOWBOAT LOUNGE

by Richard Brookhiser

Once upon a time, when Cincinnatians wanted to frisk, they would slip across the Ohio River to Kentucky for low-rent sin. The sin in towns like Newport is gone now, but the rent is still low. Indeed, the local *New York Times* stringer reported recently that Cincinnati yuppies were fanning out thereabouts in search of cheap old houses. I recently fanned out for some music and a drink, and found the Showboat Lounge.

Bellevue, Kentucky (just up the hill from Newport) is not the sort of place I typically go; I dare say, it's not where you typically go either. The Showboat sits half a block from a railroad track. The front room is a restaurant, with Volunteer Police Department Chili Cook-Off trophies in the windows. (The local passion for chili is so all-consuming that a Cincinnati politician successfully defended himself against a charge of soliciting for prostitution by arguing that, when he had asked the undercover policewomen for a "three-way," he was simply proposing a friendly bowl of chili.) The bar is in the middle, the lounge is in the back. Inside, they've never heard of the Surgeon

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General. The cigarette haze glowed with the light of neon beer signs on the walls, including fly-over brands like Genessee, and, in honor of the season, a pair of four-foot tall holiday lawn ornaments—a red and white candle, a snowman—flanking the piano.

I had gone to the Showboat because my brother-in-law was playing a gig there with Lucille O'Neill and Her Crazy Rhythm. The rhythm—the drummers and the bass—was not so crazy, but my brother-in-law (cornet) and a moonlighting high school band leader (trombone and baritone) were quite good. Lucille O'Neill herself—massive, energetic, 69 years old—banged out standards on a quaking upright, and called out the titles in a gravelly voice.

I thought everyone in the place was Lucille's age, until my wife pointed out they were simply all overweight. Fat had aged them in my eyes; young weight is a characteristic of the lower middle class. (A few years ago, the critic Paul Fussell wrote a delicious, bitchy book describing American class traits, such as fat, with the precision of Audubon painting birds. He gave his game away, though, in the last chapter, when he posited a classless class, con-

sisting of artists, writers, critics, academics—in short, Fussell himself and the slyly flattered reader. Not so fast, Paul; if there is a class system, we're all in it together.) Still, most of the patrons of the Showboat were pretty long in the tooth. They were also pretty fancily dressed for a neighborhood night spot: the gentlemen in jackets, many with ties, the ladies in sweaters and pantsuits of unnatural fibers, designed for the "fuller-figured" woman: going-out clothes. I soon saw—and heard—why.

For at every third or fourth number, one of the audience would get up and perform. The first time, I thought the singer—a bowed, white-haired man—was being given a special dispensation, perhaps to celebrate his birthday (most likely, his seventy-fifth). But he was followed over the course of the evening—and the evening went till 1:30 in the morning—by eight or ten other patrons.

The only rule of the house seemed to be, two songs to a customer. One woman was totally out of tune and pretty awful ("Bring your keys next time, honey," Lucille admonished her). One was excellent: a suave, sweet voice, and a powerful stage presence, pro-

jected from an improbable prison of flesh. Everyone else was perfectly pleasant, carrying his tunes competently, and clearly delivering his words. They did pop songs of the three-decade chunk from Benny Goodman to just before the Beatles. All of them, in their five minutes on stage, were treated like stars—introduced by the trombonist, given a little fanfare as they came up, and a cheer when they finished: house attractions, every bit as much as Bobby Short at the Carlyle.

Which is a good thing. Andy Warhol promised we would all be famous for fifteen seconds in the media age. A damnable offer, which has meant in practice that no one can be famous for more than fifteen seconds. Keith Mano has suggested that the only chance people have nowadays of breaking out of their media-battered passivity is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. But he had never been to Bellevue, Kentucky.

Every hour or so, the atmosphere got so thick, I had to take a coatless turn up and down the sleeping, wintry hill, just to stay awake. There is a small dance floor (brush up on your Lindy), and a larger and more interesting menu than you might expect. I don't know if the right of performance extends to visitors. Bring your keys, just in case. □

THE TALKIES



WASHINGTON GIGOLO

by Jacob Weisberg

Sidney Lumet's new film *Power* won't be remembered as an artistic achievement, but it may survive for unwittingly capturing the mood of the 1980s. The movie embodies our current fascination with the lives of corporate executives and the national longing for a peek inside the real Washington; it wants to arouse its audience with shots of sleek space-age offices, video equipment, and private jets. In its portrayal of a political consultant's sleazy world, the movie looks like a three-dimensional copy of *Fortune* or *Manhattan, inc.*, glorifying the greed it pretends to deplore.

Power, and a remarkably similar current film called *The Imagemaker*, are doubtless forerunners of a new political cinema. What's fascinating about these movies is that unlike Washington films of the past, they aren't concerned with cynicism and corruption, like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, or with intrigue and conspiracy, like *All the President's Men*. In the new versions, all political themes and plot lines are subordinated to someone's vision of corporate luxury. The trappings of power—suits and desks—themselves become the subject matter.

The film opens with a shot of media wizard Pete St. John, played by Richard Gere, flying on his private jet and banging drumsticks to the bombastic jazz he hears through his Walkman. St. John is a whore, a Washington gigolo. For \$25,000 a month plus expenses plus 15 percent of your media budget, he'll get you elected senator, governor, you name it. Apparently David Himmelfarb, who wrote the screenplay, has loosely modeled St. John on political consultants like Pat Caddell and Roger Stone; St. John's own politics are malleable, and he hopes his candidates are too. He tells them what voters want to hear and how to say it into the camera. As he repeats again and again: once elected, "you can do whatever you want."

Like the film's lighting, Gere's

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presence is more fluorescent than incandescent. As he hops from stop to stop, advising no less than four candidates on the latest computer-assisted direct mail technology and demographic analysis (defining eighteen target groups for one candidate, including "pools and patios"), Gere emanates a sleepy cool, giving flesh to Lumet's somewhat exaggerated message that electronic warfare has entirely superseded down-and-dirty political streetfighting.

And it's partly because Gere is so well cast that this message is so unconvincing. Caught up in the conspiracy of an Ohio candidate and his Arab backers to extort, bludgeon, and buy their way into office (an OPEC conspiracy against solar energy? in 1986?), St. John becomes suddenly disenchanted with the game he's been playing. His doubts culminate in a maudlin confession to an idealistic young candidate he is supposed to be working against. Consultants are distorting the American political process, St. John declares. But oozing comes so naturally to Gere that his supposed conversion appears utterly implausible; it's like Mephistopheles becoming a moralist and hanging up his trident. Not that St. John actually forsakes his lucrative business—at the end of the film it seems he'll go back to his clients.

Power's plot is mostly loose ends. Early in the film St. John tells Ralph, his wheelchair-bound Orthodox Jew/computer whiz, to run a check on the corrupt Ohio candidate trying to hire him. Ralph links the candidate to the Arabs and sends St. John the information. But the candidate's malevolent henchman, overplayed by Denzel Washington, finds the letter first and mutilates it. When St. John opens the envelope on his jet, he's dismayed to find only shredded paper, so he tells his chubby assistant/concubine, played by Kate Capshaw, to get another copy. But it's never mentioned again, and St. John agrees to represent the candidate

without finding out about the Arabs.

My guess is that the film was edited down from a much longer version without regard for narrative consistency. At one point, St. John is nearly killed by a faceless assassin driving a Mack truck. He confronts the Ohio candidate's henchman, complaining of harassment; his phone has been tapped, he says, and clients have dropped him. He neglects to mention that someone has tried to kill him. Nor does he bring it up with his ex-wife/muckraking journalist, played by Julie Christie, who helps him unravel the candidate's dirty deeds. Later in the film, candidate and henchmen discuss whether they should worry about St. John knowing too much.

This kind of gross disregard for the story line, not incidentally, is also a good indicator of pornography. Indeed, *Power* qualifies as what Michael Kinsley has dubbed "executive porn." Salary figures replace sex and violence as a means of titillation. Expensive objects are intended to provide all the excitement modern voyeurs crave. The audience is supposed to revel in the cut of the suits Gere wears so well, and the fact that his suspenders aren't the clip-on variety. The inappropriate, futuristic set for St. John's office and bar—a playground of silver bakelite—is drenched in corporate wealth. Low-angle photography reinforces the idea, making the furniture look more imposing, more the embodiment of megabucks.

The supporting actors try to make up for the half-baked plot and Gere's vacuum-like presence by overacting. Julie Christie flails wildly. Gene Hackman, as St. John's sodden former boss, makes an elemental acting mistake by overplaying the drunkard's wobble. On the other hand, Matt Salinger, as the wide-eyed Ohio challenger, does his best with a plastic role; his part is written so badly that it's hardly possible to distinguish his idealistic speeches from the cynical rhetoric of his opponent.

Gauged against the real world of political consultants, *Power* is an exaggeration. None that I've heard of has his own jet. And while they earn far more than their services are conceivably worth, not even Stu Spencer charges \$25,000 a month. But the film underestimates the whorishness of the whole flock of consultants, lobbyists, and publicists, whether conservative or liberal, that are turning Washington into a greed circus. Case in point: conservative lobbyist Robert K. Gray recently signed up to represent the Marxist government of Angola.

Despite the movie's antagonism, political consultants will be delighted

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