



2. Hugo Factoid of the Week: The best batting average with at least two nominations is a tie between Walter Miller, Jr. (A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ and "The Darfstellar") and Octavia Butler ("Speech Sounds" and "Bloodchild"), each with two wins out of two nominations. Next week: who has the most Hugo wins in the fiction

THE MT VOID

Page 2

categories? [-ecl]

---

3. Well, it's springtime. This is pretty much the best time of year. It is that time of year when the climate goes from being too cold to being too hot. And people seem to look forward to it getting unpleasant. Time to put away the woolens. It is that season when the enemy is no longer the snow and the cold that you have to protect yourself from. It is the heat and the sun. The warm clothing that has protected you all winter goes into the closet. Now you want to wear as little as is legal. But this year it is taking longer to get to that point. You would think that this year would make people particularly happy. After all, five or six times it has gone from being too cold to too hot. It just keeps going back for one last shot of icy air time and again. And it is the time of year when each college and university makes the same cutesy joke. What is the very last event in you college career? If you are a student, it is sort of the end of everything you have known and enjoyed for the last four years, maybe the last eight years, maybe the last twenty-two. In any case, it is pretty final. And what is the event called? Commencement. The University of Pennsylvania, which I happened to be passing, was celebrating their 240th commencement, so I take it that it has been happening for at least 120 years. And each one has been called a "commencement" in spite of the fact that everybody participating has a lump in their throat and is thinking that this is the end of it all. If you think about it, it really is a hokey name. It is like all those post-holocaust films of the 50s and 60s in which we see the world blasted apart in the beginning of the film and this small pocket of survivors gets together. And the last survivors have either fought among themselves, or against evil juvenile delinquents on motorcycles, or against marauding mutants, or all

three. And finally the last man and the last woman have survived. And no, only the bad ones have them named Adam and Eve. But they go off together into the sunset. The whole silly film is over. And what do you see on the screen where some films used to say, "The End"? What does it say? "The Beginning." That is what I think of whenever I see some school has their final activity and call it "Commencement." [-mrl]

---

#### 4. VILNA'S GOT A GOLEM (a theater review by Mark R. Leeper):

Power and the effects of power are the subject of Lou Jacob's allegorical VILNA'S GOT A GOLEM. The play takes place in 1899 with a troupe of Jewish actors putting on a play set in 1540 in which the Jews of Vilna build a golem. To the performance has come a

government official from the Bureau of Jewish Affairs. Of course the official does not speak a word of Yiddish. This means that each chapter of the play has to be explained to the official. (Of course, this production of the play is in English, but it is clear which parts are supposed to be Yiddish, which Russian.) While the play is basically a fantasy in which the Jews of Vilna use a golem to avenge the bloody pogroms aimed at Jews, they must try to hide this from the official who could use the anti-Christian play as an excuse for murder. (A golem is an animated statue that is brought to life using the same formula God used to create Adam. The golem, however, has no soul and does what he is told like a robot. Through centuries of murderous anti-Jewish pogroms the Jews consoled themselves with stories of this somewhat monstrous protector.) Both the external and the internal plays start out as comedies, but slowly more interesting themes work their way into the plot.

In the internal play, which is the main focus of the first of two acts, the community of Vilna (today known as Vilnius, Lithuania) tries to lead happy lives but live in constant fear of the pogroms (bloody anti-Jewish riots that were very common through the 1800s). Two comic cobblers learn that the Cossacks are only twenty miles

away and could easily again drop onto the Jewish community to rape and murder. Deciding that they need protection, they build a golem over the strenuous objections of their rabbi. But the comedy is put on hold while one of the cobblers, Zavel, gives a harrowing account of the murder of his pregnant wife. This is why he wants more than protection--he wants revenge. The depth of the hatred that some of the Jews feel for the non-Jews around them is dwarfed by the depravity of the treatment they have received at the hands of non-Jews. The golem is the perfect weapon. It is a Frankenstein-like monster that kills non-Jews without mercy, but will never harm a Jew. This raises the question of just who the golem, who is an instrument of God, thinks is a Jew and who is not, since there is some controversy on that issue. But more serious issues will arise.

The golem responds only to Zavel's commands and Zavel is eaten with hatred for the non-Jews who have persecuted him and his people, murdering his family. Soon he no longer cares if the non-Jews are guilty or not. The monster has become not the golem but the man who controls him. The persecuted and the persecutor have changed places. The young, drunk with the power of being on top, has stopped going to synagogue. And the Jewish community has exchanged one set of problems for another. Now they are riding the tiger. If they destroy the golem or even stop using it, they fall prey to the revenge of the non-Jews. If they continue to use it, they themselves are the oppressors. In the end the story is an allegory that is equally applicable to nuclear weapons and to the Middle East politics. Its conclusion is hopelessness: that there will always be oppressors and the oppressed. It is ironic that even a

Jewish power fantasy is tinged with the question of whether it really is a good idea to be the powerful. Is the perpetrator or the victim actually better off? The play by Ernest Jaselovitz has deceptively simple layers of meaning. Lou Jacob directed the production at the Harold Prince theater of the University of Pennsylvania. There the production is simple with two tall ladders flanking the stage, a small Aron Kodesh (an ark for Torah) on the stage (which doubles for the whole synagogue), and a klezmer band in the background. Of the various dramatic plays and movies I have seen on the subject of the golem, and by now I have seen many, this

is probably the best. [-mrl]

Mark Leeper  
MT 3F-434 908-957-5619  
mleeper@lucent.com

A great many people think they are thinking when  
they are merely rearranging their prejudices.

--William James