

HIGHER DIRECTIVE

By Tom Sizgorich, California State U., Long Beach

Singleton goes from the streets to the classroom

At 26, John Singleton has lived out the most fevered and wild-eyed fantasies of 100,000 film students.

In 1990, the U. of Southern California film school graduate turned his senior thesis script into what film critic Roger Ebert called "one of the best films in recent years." *Boyz n the Hood* was nominated for a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and hailed by critics in the United States as ground-breaking. The film became an overnight cultural touchstone and the standard by which urban dramas are now judged. It also gave Singleton a lifetime of Hollywood clout, enabling him to make his second film, *Poetic Justice*, starring Janet Jackson and Tupac Shakur.

Four years after his initial breakthrough, Singleton has taken the camera from the streets to the classroom for his third feature film, *Higher Learning*. Not bad for a 20something.

Fight The Powers That Be

"Our generation is the most dangerously passive generation... ever," Singleton laments. The director, dressed in black and head shaved, is overseeing the post-production of *Higher Learning* at a busy sound stage in Los Angeles. "Here we are killing each other, but we're also letting other people dictate our future... We should be tearing up shit like they did in the '60s."

Nearby, a group of actors is dubbing



Laurence Fishburne (right) educates in *Higher Learning*.

the background sounds to several scenes. On cue, the group erupts in babble, simulating the crowd scene on the screen before them. On-screen, a policeman unfurling a swastika flag stands between two opposing groups — one white, the other black. The scene swims in metaphor, which seems lost on the actors.

The performers who represent the crowd are themselves divided. One group of actors represents the "black perspective" and the other, the "white perspective."

"Do the white perspective first," calls The Woman Who Seems To Be In Charge.

"Oh, you can't do that," comes the response.

"I know," The Woman Who Seems To Be In Charge chuckles. "They're always first." General laughter.

On the surface, the post-production set of *Higher Learning* seems to exist in a state of racial détente — exchanges like the one above are common. Laughter suggests that the film's cast and crew are free of the anxieties and polarization experienced by the characters on screen.

But if you listen closely, some of the laughter on the set sounds forced.

Unlearn

John Singleton is on a roll. "See, most people who are running things... are like 10 or 15 years away from dying," he says. "They don't give a f—k about us."

"[Young people need to] unlearn all of the things the old school taught us about communicating with each other... about being afraid to talk about certain things," he says. These "certain things" are at the heart of *Higher Learning*.

The film, set at the fictional Christopher Columbus University — a private, predominantly white institution somewhere in the western United States — chronicles one semester in the lives of three black freshmen.

"It's a powerful-ass picture," Singleton says. "I'm hoping the movie will get the whole *Boyz n the Hood* monkey off my back. I grew up in the streets. I know the streets. I



can write about the streets. But I also know about other things."

Singleton says he expects resistance to *Higher Learning* from the mainstream. "I think amongst us [people in their 20s] — we'll get it. But I don't know about the older crowd. I think they're going to be afraid of [the film]."

Singleton says that mainstream viewers may feel threatened by the "very anti-establishment" film, which examines such time-worn institutions as the American educational system and such newly conceived institutions as political correctness — a term which draws from Singleton a percussive "f—k that."

A Long Way To Go

The set of *Higher Learning*, Singleton says, was ripe for tension because of the movie's subject matter.

"But there was none of that," he says. "The cast and crew were straightforward and avoided the pussy-footing of PC

speech. We communicated our differences — black people, white people, gay people, straight people. We were just out with our shit." Because of that, Singleton says, his shoot lacked the factionalism manifested in so much of society.

But still, one has to wonder. Behind the glass partition isolating Singleton from his actors, the "white perspective" has just been heard and the "black perspective" now comes to the fore.

Unwittingly, the opposing groups fall immediately into the stereotype of interracial dialogue — blacks fed up and angry, whites frightened and bewildered. Each group reacting to the same set of images, each seeing something completely different. Each, in the end, addressing only themselves.

As they finish their scenes, the actors who comprise the black and white perspectives return to their previous places. Blacks on the left. Whites on the right.

College, credit cards and fascism

U.: *It seems like when you get to college, people should be more tolerant. But when you do get there —*

John Singleton: — They learn to be intolerant. When you go to school, you're not taught to flip the script on everything and change this whole thing. You're taught, really, to be a worker. They give you your credit card when you first come to the university. You're taught to be... actually, a slave.

U.: *They put you under the yoke.*

Singleton: They put you in debt. You're taught to be an alcoholic, you know [laughs].

U.: *So they're preparing you to be a worker?*

Singleton: They're not preparing you to change the system; they're preparing you to participate in it. [Drunk freshman voice:] "Hey, let's get drunk!" Or, "Hey, I got a free credit card!" Or, "Oh, I came here to get rich. I came here to go to business school so I could learn to get rich. I'm going to law school." Why do you want to go to law school? "I dunno, that's where they said you could learn to make some money." You know?

In school... I would go up to my teachers and tell 'em, "Look, I'm not coming to class. Because I'm not here to complain about why I'm not writing. I'm going to go out and write. This is my shit. This is my expression."

U.: *Was there a lot of static between you and the [USC] film department when you were there?*

Singleton: Yeah, yeah. They called me everything in the book. They said I was egotistical, that I was a black supremacist. [Laughs.] I mean, I was just like — hey, I'm going to a university that's almost like a fascist institution. But it's not just 'SC. All universities are like that.