

By MICHAEL GILTZ

He is the center of attention. When Steve Martin walks into a room, every head turns and you can't help thinking about his old comedy routine about the perfect date: a woman with no neck. "When we walked into a room," the joke went, "every head turned. Except hers because... *she had no neck!*"

It was silly, offbeat humor like that which originally made Martin a star, and now he was in Los Angeles to promote his latest film, a comedy called *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, which is directed by John Hughes and co-stars John Candy. The film opens on Wednesday, Nov. 25.

Martin is attending a press conference — along with Hughes and Candy — to talk about the comedy. He is dressed in a natty suit, one much like his character Neal Page might wear. Page is a businessman trying to get home for Thanksgiving only to be delayed by transportation problems and an obnoxious fellow traveler named Del Griffith (Candy).

The two other men attract attention, but Martin is clearly the

Main Event. He is casual, friendly and very funny. But most of all he is dignified, the result of his very satisfying cinematic successes.

Earlier this year he wrote and starred in *Roxanne*, a delightful updating of *Cyrano de Bergerac* that received glowing reviews for his winning, star-making performance. Martin was subtle and reserved, with a style and grace befitting Cary Grant or Fred Astaire. That presence has carried over to *Planes*, where he maintains a compelling on-screen presence that is quiet, controlled and very effective — much like a '50s leading man with a very modern sensibility. He has become a star.

You can see it off-screen as well. When Martin walks into the press room, he spots John Hughes, who is already seated. "You never call, you never write!" Martin exclaims,

Steve Martin Becomes A Star

rushing over in mock anger.

The old Steve Martin might have pretended to choke Hughes... or better yet he would have tripped on the way over and then desperately tried to cover up his own clumsiness. But the new Martin pulls back at the last second, composed and in control, acknowledging the laughter with an easy smile.

That's a far cry from the wild and crazy guy who was such a fool he thought he was cool; the stand-up comic who could make a first-grader feel superior.

Whatever the reason — whether because *Roxanne* was a story he had worked on for years or whether it's just that his time has come — one thing is clear: a transformation has taken place. The lackluster comedian who'd starred in countless forgettable comedies (*Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, *The Man With Two Brains*, *The Lonely Guy*), the man who seemed to have used up all his chances, has changed. *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* is the first in what is sure to be a string of films starring Steve Martin the Star.

