RUSSIA!

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I haven’t been writing about President Trump lately. One reason I haven’t is that you can read all you want to read about Trump, anytime you want to. In fact, you could easily spend all your waking hours reading about Donald Trump. The other reason is that when I write about Trump on Tuesday afternoon, my column is often old news by Wednesday noon, especially if the president is watching morning television and tweeting, which appears to rival golf as his favorite activity.

This morning, for example, Trump tweeted: “Sorry folks, but if I would have relied on the Fake News of CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, washpost or nytimes, I would have had ZERO chance winning WH.”

I suspect the only reason Trump didn’t add Reuters, AP, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, USA Today, The Guardian, and other major news outlets to that list is that Twitter limits him to 140 characters.

In the face of increasing pressure from the multiple investigations into his campaign’s connections to the Russian hacking of the presidential election, and — quite naturally — the increasing number of stories on those investigations, Trump is left with one option: Convince the American people that every news outlet is “fake,” except the few who will support him, no matter what he does.

Part of this effort is the creation of his own fake news operation, which now includes 15 million fake Twitter followers, most of which are “bots” with no followers and no personal identification. But he also has many “followers” such as “Hispanics for Trump” and “Italian-Americans for Trump,” bogus accounts created by hackers who retweet Trump and defend him on comment sites and help spread false news stories.

I can’t recommend strongly enough that you read a post that circulated this week called “How the Trump-Russia Data Machine Games Google to Foo the Americans.” It’s staggering how we’re being played. One example cited occurred on May 15th, when Trump met with Russian officials in the White House and leaked classified intel to them. The mainstream media can story after story about the incident. Then, oddly enough, the next day, May 16th, on right-wing media sites, a flood of stories appeared about the time President Obama leaked classified intel about the bin Laden raid that “got people killed.” Don’t remember that? That’s because it didn’t happen. Yet, if you googled “Obama collusion bin Laden” on May 16th, six years after bin Laden was taken out, the first four pages of Google listed stories about the mythical incident.

That’s fake news, folks. And it’s a weapon being used by the Russians and by Trump newly reactivated “war room.” It’s why Trump suddenly has millions more “followers” than he had two weeks ago. They are cyber soldiers whose mission is to spread disinformation and confuse the American public. Their mission is to provide ammunition for your (often unwitting) Trump-loving friends in the war for American hearts and minds.

None of this is normal. All of this should be terrifying. The very institutions our republic is based on — the free press, the judiciary, our intelligence and law enforcement services — are all under assault from this president. The mainstream press is “fake news.” The judicial system is full of biased, crackpot judges. The CIA, FBI, NSA, and other intelligence and law enforcement organizations are now the “deep state,” whose only mission is to bring down our fearless and lawless leader.

People, this is not normal. This is not who we are. This administration has no coherent policies on the environment or trade or foreign relations or NATO or health-care or the intelligence and law-enforcement organizations are now the “deep state,” whose only mission is to bring down our fearless and lawless leader.

This week, former FBI director James Comey testifies before Congress. If his testimony, as is expected, provides further evidence of obstruction of justice, it will likely ratchet up the pressure on this president and begin a process that could lead to Trump’s impeachment. It can’t happen soon enough.

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The New York Times Crossword

ACROSS
1 Back in • Golf or tennis lesson topic
14 Time Lords, e.g.
16 Kinko solution
18 Something that may help control the border?
19 Shop item
20 Road figure
22 Archery or sand edit
24 Same old
25 Fix permanently
27 X factor?
28 House flip, e.g.
29 Very loud
27 Celebrity ex of Bruce and Ashton
31 With 26-Drown, bit of winter fun
32 Really hot
37 1976 Nobel share

ANSEWER TO PREVIOUS PUZZLE

1 Back in • Golf or tennis lesson topic
9 The New York Times Syndication Sales Corporation
14 Time Lords, e.g.
16 Kinko solution
18 Something that may help control the border?
19 Shop item
20 Road figure
22 Archery or sand edit
24 Same old
25 Fix permanently
27 X factor?
28 House flip, e.g.
29 Very loud
27 Celebrity ex of Bruce and Ashton
31 With 26-Drown, bit of winter fun
32 Really hot
37 1976 Nobel share

DOWN
1 Carpe, e.g.
2 Tiny zit
3 50-50, e.g.
4 Like the lower half of Haiti’s flag
5 Game with an official called a stickman
9 “parliament Hill,” in Mr. Magoo
10 Town descended from alpemostocks
11 Warning, e.g.
12 They often turn brown green
13 Initiation, e.g.
14 Yoga class directive
15 Like bananas in banana splits
16 Like the upper half of Haiti’s flag
22 Coachman’s
23 Fine from
25 See 20-Across
26 “Women!”
31 Topper for Chopin’s Tramp
32 Parcel portion
33 Org., concerned with some labs
34 Thrill during an evacuation
35 Broil seen in “Wayne’s World”
36 Perfectly
39 N.B.A. coach Van Gundy
41 Like melancholy
43 Ancient New
45 Like the lower before a Saint’s home, for short
46 Powerful D.C.
48 Comic who Risked a ticket with some labs
49 Requisite
50 Guardian
51 Cockamamie
52 Like bananas in banana splits
53 Like the upper half of Haiti’s flag
54 Freedom Party
55 Abbr.
56 Like the lower half of Haiti’s flag
57 Another cousin of ibid.
58 Something that freedom parties...
59 From cousin of ibid.

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Google Trends recently tweeted a revealing map of America’s most misspelled words by state.

North Dakota can’t seem to get “dilemma” right, while South Dakota struggles with “college.” “Sauerkraut” defeats Pennsylvanians, while Wisconsinites seem to have the most trouble with “Wisconsin.”

Here in Tennessee, residents are given to rather chaotic spellings of the word “chaos.” This will come as no surprise to Fly on the Wall readers, who will be familiar with the catchphrase “Get CHOAS a copy editor.”

CHOAS!

While MLGW’s Twitter feed may have gotten a little testy from time to time, the Memphis utility company has been working overtime to serve those who lost power in last weekend’s devastating storm. That may not mean much to those who remain in the dark and have grown desperate enough to bribe hardworking linemen with cold beer.

Like the old saying goes, “If at first you don’t succeed, remind everybody that the beer’s getting warm.”

CHAOS!

Straight-line winds shot through Memphis last week, creating the third-largest power outage in Shelby County history, leaving 45 percent of Memphis Light, Gas and Water (MLGW) customers in the dark (and the heat).

Telephone poles and power lines lay destroyed next to uprooted trees, which, in some cases, blocked access to roads. Trees rested on people’s houses and cars, especially in areas of town hit the hardest like Frayser and Midtown.

Other places hit hard included Overton Park, where trees fell near Overton Bark and the Rainbow Lake Playground.

The Tom Lee Memorial obelisk, which stood in the riverfront park, fell and smashed to pieces on the ground. Public buildings like the training centers for the Memphis Fire Services Division and Memphis Police Department sustained major damage to their roofs.

Effects of the storm were felt throughout the city, as 188,000 MLGW customers were without power at the peak of the outages, leaving businesses closed, homes dark and hot, and traffic lights inoperable.

As of press time, MLGW had whittled that number down to about 2,500 as crews worked throughout the weekend.

But here’s what happened in the week following the storm …

DAY ONE:
MLGW began by repairing primary circuits tied to hospitals, water pumping stations, and sewer treatment plants, followed by circuits that affect the greatest number of customers.

By Sunday morning, the utility was able to restore power to 41,000 of those customers, but estimated full restoration would take more than a week. The utility enlisted the help of 40 outside crews, including crews from North Carolina and Kentucky.

Meanwhile, the Memphis Public Works Division received reports of 100 trees down in streets by 8 a.m. Sunday.

DAY TWO:
On Monday — Memorial Day — the number of those without power dropped to 125,000, as MLGW then had 70 additional outside crews working to restore power in the city.

Mayor Jim Strickland and county officials began work to qualify the area for federal disaster assistance. To qualify, the cost of damages to public spaces and the costs of cleanup had to exceed $9 million.

DAY THREE:
Those without power on Tuesday had lowered to just above 64,000, while the number of reported trees in the street reached 439. The Memphis City Council approved Strickland’s request for $6 million from the emergency reserves for storm debris cleanup.

DAY FOUR:
Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell declared a state of emergency, beginning the process of qualifying for federal assistance. City officials projected storm costs at nearly $10 million, exceeding the federal assistance threshold.

DAY FIVE:
By Thursday, about 97 outside crews were working with MLGW. The number of those still without power had dropped to fewer than 22,000.

By Friday, about 97 outside crews were working with MLGW. The number of those without power was less than 30,000. AT&T device-charging stations were established at libraries and community centers. The Salvation Army began serving meals at the Ed Rice Community Center.

DAY SIX:
On Friday, MLGW said their restoration resources had surpassed those of Hurricane Elvis in 2003. Those still without power dropped to fewer than 22,000.
Mayors from across the country and up and down the Mississippi River (including Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland) vowed to keep working toward a clean future despite President Donald Trump's removal of the United States from the Paris climate agreement.

Trump said last week that the deal was a threat to the U.S. economy and its sovereignty. He said he planned to negotiate a better deal on climate change with other countries.

The decision quickly made ripples at home as mayors with the Mississippi River Cities and Towns Initiative (MRCTI) said they were “disappointed” in the decision and that it removes the U.S. from the negotiating table on the details of the program.

More specifically, they said rising waters in the Mississippi River would threaten $146.6 billion in economic activity. Each year, Strickland said $6.3 billion of those products move through Tennessee to U.S. and foreign markets, noting that the Port of Memphis is the second-largest on the river and fifth-largest nationwide.

But Strickland took a broader look at the issue of climate change in a Friday statement, saying he “supports responsible climate policy and the goals of the Paris Agreement.”

“In fact, the city of Memphis started taking action years ago on many of the items outlined by this group of mayors,” Strickland said. “For instance, we've already completed a greenhouse gas inventory, and Memphis

The so-called Climate Mayors issued a letter in support of the Paris Agreement.

3.0 will be working on a climate action plan.”

On Thursday, a group of 86 mayors from across the country (who call themselves the Climate Mayors) issued a letter on Medium, saying “the president's denial of global warming is getting a cold reception from Americans cities.”

That letter said they'd push their own cities to increase investments in renewable energy, buy and create more demand for electric cars, cut greenhouse gas emissions, and more.

“And if the president wants to break the promises made to our allies enshrined in the historic Paris Agreement, we'll build and strengthen relationships around the world to protect the planet from devastating climate risks,” the letter said. “The world cannot wait — and neither will we.”

The letter was signed by the mayors of the country's biggest cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and Boston. In Tennessee, it was signed by Nashville Mayor Megan Barry and Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero. Regionally, it was signed by the mayors of New Orleans and Little Rock.

Meanwhile, Memphis Rep. Steve Cohen said the U.S. stood to save $5.3 trillion in health-care costs by staying in the agreement. Beyond the financial costs, the decision “could prove to be a calamitous decision to humanity.”

“Without action, the continued effects of climate change will lead to increased instances of natural disasters, severe drought, and famine across the globe that could result in humanitarian crises and war,” Cohen said in a statement.

U.S. Sen. Bob Corker said he talked to Trump's team “several times” last week about the decision.

“I appreciate the president's desire to renegotiate an agreement that is more in line with what is achievable in a manner that promotes an increase in the standard of living of American citizens and protects our environment,” Corker said.

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Looking Ahead: The Electoral Picture

Next week’s District 95 showdown is the opening act of an unfolding scenario.

Nature, rather famously, abhors a vacuum. And, for better or worse, few vacuums exist, year by year, in the calendar of elections for Memphis and Shelby County.

Leap years occupy a special space on the election calendar by reason of their being the occasion for presidential elections. In recent years, however, including the whole of the 21st century, Tennessee’s ever-increasing reliability as a red state has significantly eroded the excitement that used to go with its former status as a bellwether state, partisan-wise.

Once in a while, a fair amount of drama might attach to a Super Tuesday presidential primary in Tennessee, as it did, for example, in 2008, when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton each had significant statewide campaigns going on the Democratic side. But normally there is an anti-climactic sense to those preferential primaries here, generally held in late February or March, the balance in both parties having already been tipped elsewhere — in Iowa or New Hampshire or South Carolina.

The same steady process of Republicanization (how’s that for a coinage?) has increasingly applied to the rest of the electoral menu — including the races in even-numbered years for governor, U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, and the Tennessee legislature — though some suspense is often generated in primary elections.

Such is likely to be the case next year, in what is shaping up to be a hotly contested (and well-financed) GOP primary for governor — with former state Commissioner of Economic Development Randy Boyd and Nashville businessman Bill Lee, both well-heeled, already running, ultra-rightist state Senator Mae Beavers of Mt. Juliet just declared, and 4th District U.S. Representative Diane Black, also wealthy, expected to jump in, along with presumed Shelby County favorite Mark Norris of Collierville, the state Senate majority leader.

Democrats, too, will likely have a primary choice, with popular ex-Nashville Mayor Karl Dean already campaigning and another party favorite, state House minority leader Craig Fitzhugh of Ripley, seemingly sure to throw his hat in. (And hark!: Even so well-grounded a judge of the state political scene as the Tennessee Journal’s Ed Cromer suggests this week that 2018 could be a comeback time for Democrats in the gubernatorial race.)

On the local election scene, next year’s Republican primary for Shelby County mayor is set for a showdown between Shelby County Commissioner Terry Roland and County Trustee David Lanier. On the Democratic side, former commissioner and longtime political broker Sidney Chism is one certain candidate. Others may emerge, with former commissioner and assistant University of Memphis law dean Steve Mulroy, who sought the office in 2014, being one possibility.

The identity of the latest primary challenger to 9th District Democratic congressman Steve Cohen, who has fairly easily knocked off several in a row, is uncertain, and 8th District GOP congressman David Kustoff would seem to be home free at this juncture.

Looking ahead into 2019, rumored possibilities to challenge Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland include former Democratic chair Keith Norman, pastor of First Baptist Church on Broad; Memphis Police Association president Mike Williams, who ran for the office in 2015; and Terrence Patterson, president and CEO of the Downtown Memphis Commission.

Meanwhile, in the current electoral “off year” of 2017, there is a special election in state House District 95 (Collierville, Germantown, Eads) for the seat vacated in February by former Representative Mark Lovell amid allegations of sexual harassment.

Though two independents, Robert Schutt and Jim Tomasik, are on the ballot, the race — to be decided next Thursday, June 15th — is considered to be between Republican nominee Kevin Vaughan, an engineer and real estate developer, and lawyer Julia Byrd Ashcroft, the Democratic nominee. n
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There is a serious argument to be made that the most important recent development on the national political scene is not the ongoing and inexorable rush to judgment on the troubling Russophilic foibles of President Donald J. Trump, a Barnum-like figure who seems more and more out of his element, even dangerously so. That would be the alarming decision by Trump to remove the United States from the common-sense Paris Accord pledging the nations of the Earth to work together on a means to combat the unmistakable menace of climate change.

Trump's decision puts the United States, formerly something of a leader on the environmental front, in the unaccustomed position of an international outlier — at variance not only with scientific consensus but with world opinion. As such, it is as much a scandal and embarrassment as is his cavalier disregard of the nation's long-established NATO alliance. The president's decision to jettison such environmental safeguards as currently exist (backed by his scofflaw appointee as EPA head Scott Pruitt) constitutes an immediate threat to public safety, which is more consistently threatened these days by unpredictable phenomena from the natural world than it is by ISIS, al Qaeda, Vladimir Putin, and all the country's other potential political and military enemies rolled into one.

Memphians in particular have spent much of the last 10 days coping with the loss of power coming from the latest in what, in a very short number of years, has been a series of freak weather events. The swirling winds and seeming nonstop rainstorms of the weekend before last closely resembled, both in their severity and in the damage wreaked, the severe weather disturbance that, a decade or so back, we locals dubbed "Hurricane Elvis." Just a tad further back than that was an ice storm that immobilized transportation, caused fatalities, and knocked out power on a scale comparable to the other mentioned events.

Beyond that, we residents of the Mississippi Delta area have learned to cope with frequent tornado watches and warnings and with the real thing itself — like the lethal one of the mid-'90s that laid waste to portions of Germantown — and with several successor tornados of similar intensity.

We're talking about lives lost and endangered, billions of dollars in damages, nationwide, setbacks in urban progress, and, not least, the "fear itself" that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once declared to be our worst and most crippling adversary.

That was a time, of course, when the leader of the nation could be trusted to deal truthfully and responsibility with reality. Virtually all the previous 44 presidents fell into that category. Now, we ended up with one who distrusts not only the consensus of the scientific community but, it would seem, truth itself.

There has to be a way out of this predicament. Hopefully, the voices which assured us at the resolution of the Watergate crisis that "the system worked" will be able to say that again. But it remains to be seen.
New Message Needed
Democrats search for a new direction and new leaders.

Republicans won the May special election for Montana’s congressional seat even after their candidate throttled and body-slammed a reporter. The upcoming special election in Georgia remains close even with a weak Republican candidate.

So, what will it take for Democrats to start winning?

First, the Montana fisticuffs showed that Republicans can react volitionally to questions about President Trump’s failed effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare. Their candidate went ballistic when the reporter, Ben Jacobs of The Guardian, asked about the projected higher premiums and fewer people insured under Trump’s health-care plan.

Second, last week’s poor jobs numbers and Trump’s lack of progress on tax reform offer more evidence that the GOP lacks a strong record for its candidates to run on. And, third, the Democratic base is fired up. With Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate deal, the party is unified in its fury at him.

But with the president retaining strong support among his GOP base, are these hopeful signs just mirages similar to the illusions that led Democrats to think Trump could never be elected president? Is there any concrete reason to think that the nation’s politics have changed enough to give the Democrats the 24 seats they need to take control of the House and set themselves up to defeat Trump in 2020?

In Montana, the Democratic candidate lost by only six points, while Hillary Clinton, the party’s 2016 presidential nominee, lost by 20. That margin narrowed even as the GOP outspent the Democrats. And most people voted long before the Republican, Greg Gianforte, resorted to violence.

Kyle Kondik, managing editor of the Crystal Ball newsletter from the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics, says: “Democrats can point to overall special election trends that suggest the opportunity for significant gains next year if they can be replicated on a nationalized scale.”

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee announced last month that it was expanding the targets for GOP-held House seats in 2018 beyond the 23 districts currently represented by a Republican but won by Clinton. They are now aiming at an incredible 79 seats.

Before he withdrew from the climate deal, Trump’s approval rating was underwater by 14 points: Gallup reported last week that the president’s job performance was approved by 40 percent of the country, while 54 percent disapproved.

And as the FBI, special counsel, and congress continue to probe into the Trump campaign’s ties to Russia, the GOP policy agenda could be derailed before the 2018 races.

A Politico/Morning Consult poll last week found that 43 percent of voters want impeachment proceedings right now. A Quinnipiac University poll last month found the president with the support of just 29 percent of self-described independents — a group with which he had scored plurality support last November.

But all that is noise inside a political bubble unless there is a winning message from Democrats that goes beyond another dose of fury at Trump.

Last week, a group of Democrats formed the People’s House Project to elect left-of-center candidates. The new group’s goal is to give Democratic candidates in the Midwest and rural areas a new look, with a jobs-first focus. It is one front in the battle to shape the Democrats’ future. That includes the search for an energetic, charismatic leader able to withstand Trump’s attacks.

The Democratic base is fired up. With Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris climate deal, the party is unified in its fury at him.

Former Vice President Biden announced last week that he is forming a political action committee to support candidates in the 2018 congressional races. It is also a possible platform for him to run in 2020.

And two senators, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Cory Booker of New Jersey, also look to be auditioning for the role of leading Democrat. They offer different looks for the anti-Trump brigade.

Warren satisfies Democrats who want to go toe-to-toe with a president they view as illegitimate, corrupt, dangerous, and even treasonous. They want Trump treated by Democrats the way President Obama was treated by Republicans for the last eight years — with contempt and unremitting opposition.

Meanwhile, Booker wants to offer a contrast to the president by branding himself and Democrats as a force for unifying the nation across political lines. “It’s gotta be about love. It’s gotta be about the connections we have to each other,” he told Vox recently.

The Democrats’ search for answers remains a work in progress.

Juan Williams is an author and a political analyst for Fox News Channel.
It is a time, as we all know, when relations have become complicated again between the United States and Russia, formal allies during two 20th-century wars, deadly opponents during decades of the undeclared Cold War, and, at least, theoretically, friendly for some years until the relatively recent past. It is a time when many American politicians are again declaring that a resurgent Russia — no longer Communist and deprived of peripheral portions of the old Soviet Union that are now formally independent — has become this nation’s most formidable adversary once again.

But not all American politicians: Our chief domestic drama now centers on the fact that the administration of our newly installed president, Donald Trump, a man of uncertain purpose despite his ad hoc Republican identity and his shrilly stated “America first” declarations, is under suspicion of ongoing collusion with the regime of Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, a former KGB official who is suspected of having arranged the cyber-hacking and sabotage of Trump’s 2016 presidential opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Hopefully, a number of investigations now under way will clear up this mystery. But, for most Americans, another mystery remains. No longer an Iron Curtain monolith per se, Russia today has a formally democratic structure, and Putin, now president of his nation and ensconced in a dominant leadership position for the entirety of the 21st Century, is subject to election.

But there remain strong suspicions about the validity of Russian democracy, and numerous students of the country insist that dissent, whether by political opponents or by journalistic inquiry, is dangerous and potentially fatal. Meanwhile, Russia’s interventions in Syria and neighboring Ukraine have aroused fears of a renewed imperialism.

Though much has undoubtedly changed about Russia, a statement made by the great British leader Winston Churchill at the conclusion of the Second World War still represents the American state of mind: Russia, said Churchill in a description suggestive of the famous Matryoshka dolls that incorporate layered images within images, “is a riddle wrapped inside an enigma inside a mystery.”

All of which encouraged me, in a bucket-list mood, to get a glimpse of the Russian reality for myself. Assisted enormously by the office of 9th District Tennessee Congressman Steve Cohen, I got my visa (no easy thing) and boarded a flight in mid-May for a week in Moscow. I am under no delusion that so brief an exposure entitles me to speak with authority about the nature of that aforesaid riddle. But it certainly opened my eyes.

There came an afternoon, early in my visit, when, in the course of doing a little sightseeing, I disembarked from a tour bus in the general vicinity of the Kremlin, thinking I could fairly easily find my way “home” to the Best Western Plus Vega Hotel and Convention Center some 12 miles away in Moscow’s Izmailovo District.

The problem was that the Kremlin is not a single place; it is a district in itself, a walled-in former fortress of almost 70 acres, encompassing five palaces, four cathedrals, a plethora of monuments, and various official buildings, including both the seat of government and the residence of President Putin, the successor in power to the various czars, Soviet premiers, and Communist Party general secretaries who have ruled the vast Eurasian land mass that is Russia.

It is said that that Moscow is some 20 times the size of Washington, D.C., and, while that is misleading, in that the American capital’s teeming Maryland and Virginia suburbs expand its metropolitan reach enormously, it is still likely that the enclosed Kremlin area is large enough to
master the phonetic sounds of the Cyrillic alphabet. That will help somewhat to distinguish one unfamiliar name from another, though there has been a tendency in recent years to render significant public signs in Moscow in both Russian and English. Restaurant menus, directional indicators to various important public places, and, yes, subway signs get this treatment.

The problem is that this bi-lingualism, so clearly meant as a convenience to tourists, seems too new to have affected the mass of ordinary Muscovites. Stop someone in a central area of Berlin or Paris or Rome to ask directions in English, and there is a fair chance that, with a minimum of trial and error, you'll manage to get yourself a serviceable dialogue. Not so in Moscow, particularly so in the city's Metro (subway) stations, where the helpful English subscripts are less than a year old.

What can and does happen is that you often find yourself trying to communicate by a means uncannily like a game of charades, with hand gestures, purposeful pointing, and exaggerated facial expressions. In six days in Moscow, I never encountered anything remotely suggestive of an animosity to Americans, though I did suspect that the proud Muscovites found it not worth the bother to digest a foreign language, particularly one emanating from a once-rival superpower.

So getting to the Metro system's blue line on the afternoon in question was, for me, a downright Odyssean quandary, involving any number of wrong-way wanderings and thwarted dialogues. In my less frantic moments, I harbored the sardonic thought that I would have been better off if some of the darker warnings I'd had from people back home (before the trip and via texts during it) had been on target.

That is, if I'd been under surveillance, shadowed by agents of this presumed adversary regime, one or more of my surreptitious minders might have broken cover long enough to point me in the right direction. The fact is, as I'd assured all my solicitous advisers back in the States, I was neither important enough to be shadowed nor so dull that I wouldn't notice it if it happened.

And, as far as incriminating videos involving playfully incontinent hookers in my hotel room, a la circumstances imputed by one intelligence source to an erstwhile Trump visit, you can be sure that wasn't going to happen.

A little more about the denizens of the Moscow Metro — and the population at large — before dissertating somewhat on my Moscow hotel, a revelation in itself.

As I said in one of my fairly frequent Facebook posts during my several days in Moscow, the typical Metro rider is a jeans-wearing millennial glued to a cell phone. Having not ventured beyond the capital city itself, I cannot vouch for the rest of Russia, but, the aforesaid linguistic issue notwithstanding, the inhabitants of Moscow are much more like you and me than they are different.

Many of us — even our own millennial population — were raised on Cold-War shibboleths depicting Russia as a "third-world" nation, an "evil empire," a place where hot water was not available, public transportation unreliable, cars unavailable, and public conveniences nonexistent. The Russian subject ("citizen" seemed too free and easy a term) was characterized as a robot-like serf with a brain washed so much and so often as to be barely capable of real thought.

In several of my Facebook posts describing the flora and fauna that I encountered (well, the fauna, anyway; my late wife Linda was the botanist, not me) or in conversations upon my return, I reported such phenomena as the multiplicity of BMWs, Audis, and Mercedez on the heavily trafficked (and well-paved) thoroughfares of Moscow; the plethora of hip oases in the mode of Cooper-Young or Overton Square; the ubiquity of American rock-and-roll in bars, bistros, and on elevators; and the even more obvious omni-presence of familiar commercial brands: McDonald's, Dominos, Prada, Apple, Canon, Sony, Levi's, Colegate, Coca-Cola, Avon, Black & Decker, Dolby, G.E., Mary Kay, Dior, etc., etc.

A friend in Memphis, mid-trip, emailed me to suggest — whether facetiously or in earnest — that what I was seeing could be branded by the name “Potemkin.” That was a reference to one Grigory Potemkin, a seedy courtier and entrepreneur of the 18th century who, in order to impress the touring Empress Catherine II, constructed a series of make-believe villages along the Dnieper River, using false fronts which he assembled and re-assembled in advance of the movement downstream of Catherine’s traveling party.

But no, the all-too-evident modernities of Moscow and the abundant splashes everywhere of urban affluence are not cases of the Potemkin village, unless the proprietors of the brand names sampled above are in on the scam. Making allowances for conspicuous differences of a linguistic, architectural, and, undoubtedly, political nature, the Moscow of 2017 would seem to be both more prosperous and more contemporary in its ways — even in the would-be hipsters sporting “Fuck You” and “Me” T-shirts — than most Americans would imagine.

Some of this is undoubtedly due to Russia’s burgeoning trade in its sizeable oil and gas resources; much of it, too, has to do with commercial relationships with the West that are by no means one-sided. I mentioned my hotel: Its very name, Best Western Plus Vega Hotel and Convention Center, advertises its pedigree. It is one of numerous plush hosteles in Moscow that speak to the fact of multinational corporate affluence.

Numerous such high-rise palaces, many clearly foreign-owned, dot the city’s landscape, catering to both an international clientele and what would seem to be an indigenous upstart population. The unmistakable sound of Russian was the dominant language in overheard conversations at the Vega, as in the pricey clothing stores in Moscow’s several multi-story shopping malls, the oldest and best-known of which, the government-owned GUM, directly adjoins Red Square and the Kremlin.

It is hard to tell whether a significant middle class is developing in Moscow (which, in the years immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989-91, experienced a fair share of oligarchic

continued on page 14
As of May 2017, the Russian ruble was worth a shade less than 2 cents on the American dollar. A charge of $50 (the cost of an opportunistic cab driver’s assessment for a roundabout ride to the hotel from the Domodedovo Airport, 37 miles away) required a payment of 3,000 rubles. Not bad, but I was reliably informed later on that I could have bargained that way down; I did, on the way out of town later on.

Forget the third-world stories. Everything in the Best Western Vega was new and shiny and well maintained. Everything worked. Besides a posh 24-7 restaurant, there was a sizeable dining area featuring three lavish buffets, each offering an abundance of well-prepared indigenous and standard international fare for the equivalent of $12. Housekeeping and amenities were superb.

For purposes of comparison, the two hotels nearest the Tennessee state Capitol in Nashville might ask a minimum of $350 a night, depending on season and availability. A sum considerably less than that amount purchased five nights at the Vega, more than comfortable but mid-range price-wise by the measure of an online search of available hotels.

Numerous night spots were in the immediate vicinity, including a karaoke joint wherein, my ears suggested, some would-be mezzo soprano was having a go at a Dionne Warwick oldie, and, charm of charms, a short walk from the hotel was the Disneyland-like Izmailovo complex, whose fairy-tale towers — newish and candy-colored, but built in the country’s long-gone medieval style — housed a mile or two of stalls selling all kinds of souvenirs, including artifacts of the Soviet era. And offering free shots of vodka to the browser. Now, that was indeed a Potemkin Village, and Empress Catherine would have been as delighted by it as I was.

For at least half of my stay in Moscow (and the most productive half, by far), I had the good fortune of being shown around by a talented young tour guide named Ksenia Terenteva. Still in her mid-20s and of provincial origins, she had mastered several languages, including English, in which her proficiency, though fluid and idiomatic, ranks in her estimation as being only third-best, after her prowess in her native Russian and Spanish.

We took a sight-seeing boat trip down the Moscow River, the main backdrop of which was the same Kremlin vista which forms the recurrent prop for nightly cable reports on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox. In that context, it always appears other-worldly and menacing, like the fortress it originally was. It appears otherwise to one floating downstream in an excursion boat, seeing the vast complex in bas-relief against a gorgeous blue sky, its several cathedral spires competing for the eye’s attention, with the whole of it set off the rest of an eclectically designed Moscow skyline and underscored by the steady stream of commuter traffic on the riverside roadway at its base.

Seen that way, the Kremlin comes off as part monument, in the manner of the Houses of Parliament in London, and part tourist eye candy — especially as one sees it in the context of the apartment buildings, hotels, greenery; and other official buildings and historical structures of its immediate surroundings.

Essentially, Moscow boasts three dominant architectures: medieval structures, like the beautifully ornate onion-bulb churches (one of which, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, was razed under Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin but restored in the last decade); monolithic block-sized Stalin-era apartment and office buildings as well as several huge baroque-style structures (called the Seven Sisters) commissioned by the dictator; and modern, even ultra-modern, skyscrapers that suggest Atlanta, Manhattan, or, in fact, Anywhere, U.S.A.

On our boat trip, Ksenia pointed out an enormous amount of scaffolding on the far bank, just to the east of the Kremlin, where, she said, an oversized new park is under construction — a showcase playground (“a big Central Park,” she called it) that will be divided into four parts, each of which will somehow simulate the climate and characteristics of a different season.

Russian diners in the McDonald’s at the entry to the Kremlin...
This new waterfront wonder is due to be finished by 2018, when Moscow will host the World Cup in soccer. The new super-park will co-exist with the sprawling, grandly landscaped 300-acre Gorky Park downriver, in effect, book-ending the Kremlin and the rest of the central-city waterfront.

Numerous signs around town, as many in English as in Russian, advertise the imminence of the World Cup, and elsewhere along the Moscow riverfront, as in the city center, new grand hotels are being built and others renovated under the aegis of Hilton and Radisson and other marquee chains to house the expected minions who dote on the game and are sure to be flooding Moscow.

An inevitable aside: No one should be surprised if, by the time of the first game of the Cup, due to begin in June of next year in Luzhniki Stadium, it should be complemented by some new structure bearing the name Trump. And that would be an appropriate symbol of the latest permutation in the affairs of the city of Moscow and the nation it administers.

That necessarily returns one to the subject of politics, which I expect to cover in more depth in a projected follow-up article in Memphis magazine. Some nutshell moments, for now: To my disappointment, while the cable on my flat-screen hotel TV could yield up some vintage Nirvana and other cultural offerings (including serious ballet, like the superb version of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake I saw done bravura-style in an adjunct building of the Bolshoi Theatre), it lacked access to CNN, MSNBC, or Fox, the main conduits of news from America.

The nearest equivalent were several Russian news channels, a couple of which, including the well-known RT, broadcast in English, as did a Chinese channel. All of those, during my stay, focused on what was then the ongoing world tour of President Trump, and, while they seemed reliably credible on the details of his itinerary, they avoided mention of the ongoing collusion investigation in America.

There was one exception — a Russian-language channel which offered a summary of the situation one night. I have no idea what the Russian commentary was saying, but the montage of images — Trump, FBI director James Comey, and members of Congress — were familiar and in proper chronological order.

Such conversations as I had about political matters, mainly with Ksenia, suggested that Russians have a sense of things that is basically a mirror image of what Americans believe. In their telling, it is not Russia which meddles in the affairs of other nations and has committed atrocities in Syria, but America. (As if to support this notion, American commandos and air units operating in Syria did, in fact, account for inadvertent civilian deaths in a raid on a presumed ISIS stronghold that week.)

Trump is hardly regarded as statesmanlike (Ksenia referred to him as an “ill-prepared showman”), but former opponent Hillary Clinton fares worse. She is spoken of as harshly as Putin is over here, and the first time I ever heard the name Seth Rich was from Ksenia, who had picked up from Russian media the notion, pushed in America by Sean Hannity of Fox News, that Rich, a former Democratic National Committee staffer killed in a burglary last July, had been the actual donor to WikiLeaks of material embarrassing to Clinton’s presidential campaign and had paid for that transgression with his life.

I had hoped to have a conversation with one “Susie,” a member of the dissident Pirate Party of Russia, about the Russian political climate as it affected her, but — no other way to put it — she had second thoughts about talking to me. And I can only conjecture as to her reasons.

For more from Jackson’s trip, see the July issue of Memphis magazine.
steppin’ out

We Recommend: Culture, News + Reviews

Invisible Memphis  By Chris Davis

“Also in Raissa, city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence.” — Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino

Where do we live? How is it usually described? How might it be understood? These are just a few of the questions posed by Our Own Voice Theatre Troupe’s latest offering, Unseen City. The new work, written and directed by Alex Skitolsky and choreographed by Kimberly Barksdale Baker, is inspired by Italo Calvino’s Invisible Cities, a brief novel short on narrative but rich in substance. Invisible Cities tells the story of Venetian explorer Marco Polo entertaining the great Kublai Khan with exotic descriptions of cities he’s visited. Polo’s colorful, often fantastical accounts contradict the Mongol ruler’s advisors and magistrates because of Polo’s tendencies to look beyond brick, mortar, and statistics to describe the real building blocks of every place in the world: ideas.

Unseen City is a collaborative work that began with tours through Memphis neighborhoods and conversations with residents. The theatrical event attempts to reimagine Memphis as a place that’s greater than “its past and popular associations” by telling the story of an “otherworldly conqueror” who wants to understand his latest acquisition. But the more he learns about the Bluff City and its people, the less he understands. Unseen City’s action isn’t confined to the stage or even the theater. Although the show’s first half employs dance and storytelling, the second act becomes an interactive tour of Overton Square.

OUR OWN VOICE THEATRE TROUPE PRESENTS “UNSEEN CITY” AT THEATREWORKS JUNE 9TH-24TH, 8 P.M. $12. CASH ONLY. 274-1000

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Infinite Tuesday

Hey, hey, he was a Monkee — Mike Nesmith’s autobiography dazzles. Books, p. 28

Six barstools, chilled glasses, and Tigers fans — the Big S scores a perfect 10. Bar Report, p. 30

THURSDAY June 8

Norah Jones
Mud Island Amphitheatre, 8 p.m., $37
Norah Jones performs tonight in support of her genre-stretching album, Day Breaks. Opening is the Candles.

The Comedy of Errors
Theatre Mainstage, University of Memphis, 7 p.m., $16
The Tennessee Shakespeare Company presents this play about twins separated at birth.

Cut Throat Freak Show
Hi-Tone, 7 p.m., $8
Cut Throat Freak Show — burlesque, fire-eating, juggling, stunts, and more — pulls into town for its 20th anniversary tour.

Uncensored Live: Variety Show
Chuckles Comedy Club, 7-10 p.m., $10
A showcase with sketch and stand-up comedy, music, dance, and live painting (!).

FRIDAY June 9

“Disappointed”
Memphis College of Art, 6-8 p.m.
Opening reception in the Alumni Gallery featuring digital collage works by Joshua Strydom, exploring “unrequited expectations.” Specifically, Strydom recorded the disappointed faces of tourists at well-known attractions.

The Moopie Project
Crosstown Alley, 5-8 p.m.
The latest in this ongoing mural series features the work of Benjamin Pierce in which he depicts “the world as I choose to see it.”

SATURDAY June 10

Blythe & Young Block Party
Blythe and Young, 5-8 p.m.
Party in honor of this Cooper-Youn block. Each business will have its own event.

OUTbid: An Evening of Pure Imagination
Clark Opera Memphis Center, 7 p.m., $50
Silent and live auctions benefiting OUTMemphis and featuring wine and craft beer and music by the Bluff City Soul Collective.
901 Comics turns one year old this week, and Shannon Merritt, a co-owner of the Cooper-Young shop at 2162 Young, is unequivocal about the milestone. “This has been the best year of my adult life,” the lifelong comic book fan says.

In past lives, Merritt, who sports a forearm tattoo of Daredevil (original yellow costume, of course), has been a couple of different kinds of hero. He’s served his country in the Marine Corps, and he’s served his community as an officer with the Memphis Police Department. But secretly — and sometimes not so secretly — all he ever really wanted to be was a comic book store guy. The missing piece of the puzzle was partner Jamie Wright, a P&H Cafe bartender and comic book collector who took a job helping Marvel’s Iron Man creator Stan Lee work marathon autograph sessions.

With Wonder Woman on top at the box office and comic book properties dominating screens large and small, there’s never been a better time to be a fan, and Merritt says business has been good. “This is the coolest neighborhood in Memphis,” he adds, stressing the need for a comic shop to be more than just a place to pick up graphic novels and superhero titles. Nestled between a record store and a coffee shop, it’s a location that attracts readers, writers, artists, and musicians looking as much for community as commerce.

“My goal is just to try out all the things I thought would be great to do if I ever had a comic book store,” Merritt says. He’s particularly proud of his book club for comic readers and recent changes that make 901 Comics a more welcoming space for gaming culture.

This week, 901 Comics celebrates a year in business with in-store signings by Marvel and DC veterans Joe Staton and Pat Broderick on Friday and Saturday, June 9th and 10th. Saturday’s 5-8 p.m. music lineup at the Cooper-Young Gazebo features the Turn It Offs, the Gloryholes, Shamefingers, and comedian Brandon Sams.

901 COMICS ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION ALL WEEK LONG WITH CREATOR SIGNINGS JUNE 9TH-10TH AND MUSIC IN THE COOPER-YOUNG GAZEBO SATURDAY JUNE 10TH, 5-8 P.M. FREE.
Red Hot!
A homegrown tribute to Sun Records.

Sun Records’ legacy has been on the rise. Occasionally eclipsed by other luminaries of rock-and-roll, these days it would seem to be at high noon. The Country Music Hall of Fame recently hosted a special exhibit on Sam Phillips, Sun’s visionary founder. Meanwhile, Peter Guralnick recently published the definitive biography of Phillips. And then we have the CMT series, Sun Records, which was well-received despite not being renewed for a second season.

But the most telling sign of a rejuvenated Sun has been the revival of the studios that originally captured the music. Engineer/producer Matt Ross-Spang began his career at Sun Studio, helping to stock its recording facility with vintage gear, and more recently moved to Sam Phillips Recording, helping to renovate it. Fittingly, the first project done in the newly reorganized space was the tribute Feel Like Going Home: The Songs of Charlie Rich. Now, recorded jointly at Phillips and Sun, we have another tribute album about rock-and-roll, these days it would seem to be at high noon.

This album, already available in Memphis, is notable for relying only on local talent. Originating well before the television series, it leapt from the imaginations of Bryan Hayes and Steve Dunavant, of the local Americana Music Society. They contacted co-producer Tamara Saviano, “Steve and I first reached out to Tamara,” says Hayes. “She had done several of these tribute albums. She won a Grammy for Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster. And when we reached out to her, she said she wanted to work with Luther [Dickinson].” As it turned out, Dickinson would become both co-producer and band leader. This was especially fitting given that his father, the late Jim Dickinson, cut the “Cadillac Man” single for Sun in 1966.

A crack team of Memphis players steeped in the Sun tradition was recruited: Luther Dickinson on guitar, his brother Cody on drums, John Paul Keith on guitar, Amy LaVere on bass, and Rick Steff on piano. This house band drew on the vocal talents of the players for some numbers. “We knew everybody was going to honor the original compositions and recordings, but we wanted to have a little bit of leeway for our players to put their stamp on it,” says Hayes.

John Paul Keith, whose voice (since he quit smoking) conjures up the young Roy Orbison, kicks things off, with a sax cameo from Jim Spake. Amy LaVere offers a smooth version of “Ten Cats Down” by the Miller Sisters. And Luther Dickinson offers a two-part workout of Howlin’ Wolf’s “Moanin’ at Midnight.” But the band also backs notable guest vocalists, including Jimbo Mathus, Alvin Youngblood Hart, Shawn Camp, and Bryan Hayes himself. The most vintage sounds blossom in Valerie June’s “Sure to Fall (In Love with You).” Chuck Mead, musical director for the CMT series, also leads several Sun Records cast members and the house band through an impromptu version of “Red Hot.”

I asked John Paul Keith if there were any rehearsals. “Oh no!” he said. “We just showed up. They didn’t rehearse when they made the records. Why should we? We even had the advantage of hearing it all our lives.” Simply being in the old studios put the band in the right frame of mind as they cut most of the album live.

“In some cases, we were using the exact same microphones used in the original sessions,” notes Hayes. “Rick Steff was playing the same piano that Charlie Rich recorded on. The band would do a run-through, Matt would set the mics up, and we were rolling tape. There were a couple of them that were one-takers.”

Staying true to the spirit of Sun also informed the song selection. Keith notes, “I was really pleased when I saw the final track listing. There was some really well-known stuff, but there were some deep cuts as well.” The only deviation from this was the album’s one original song, “Tough Titty” by Bobby Rush. His contribution highlights Sun’s blues legacy, which is often overlooked. Says Keith, “You could argue that Sun was one of the most important blues labels ever.” In view of Phillips’ quest for the unique, Rush’s tune may conjure the label’s original spirit best of all. Though there was never a Sun version of the song, as Keith notes, “Bobby recorded it there, so there is one now.”
Red Hot! MUSIC

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Celebration of Sun Records Red Hot: A Memphis to drop nationally, Sun, we have another tribute album about Rich

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After Dark: Live Music Schedule June 8 - 14

Club 152
152 BEALE 544-7011
Live Music Wednesdays-Sundays, 7-11 p.m.; Live DJ Wednesdays-Sundays, 11 p.m.; Third Floor: DJ Tubbh Fridays, Saturdays, 10 p.m.

Handy Bar
200 BEALE 527-2687
Bad Boy Matt & the Amazing Rhythmatics Tuesdays, Thursdays-Sundays, 7-11 p.m.

Hard Rock Cafe
126 BEALE 529-0007
Terri Tollison Thursday, June 8, 6:30-9:30 p.m.; School of Rock Friday, June 9, 6-8 p.m.; Laughing at the Rock Comedy Show Friday, June 9, 10-11 p.m.; Chris Johnson Duo Saturday, June 10, 10-11 p.m.; Old School Saturday, June 10, 10 p.m.-2 a.m.

Iita Benu
145 BEALE 578-3031
Gerald Stephens Fridays, Saturdays, 6-9 p.m.; Nat Kerr Fridays, Saturdays, 9-10 p.m.; Kayla Wednesdays, Thursdays, 6-8 p.m.; Gerald Stephens Wednesday, 6-8 p.m.

King Jerry Lawler’s Hall of Fame Bar & Grille
159 BEALE
Chris Gales Solo Acoustic Show Mondays-Saturdays, noon-4 p.m.; Eric Hughes Thursdays, 5-8 p.m.; Karaoke Mondays-Thursdays, 8 p.m.; Live Bands Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.

King’s Palace Cafe
152 BEALE 521-1851
David Bowen Thursdays, 5:30-9:30 p.m.; Fridays, 6:30-10:30 p.m.; and Sundays, 5:30-9:30 p.m.

King’s Palace Cafe Patio
162 BEALE 521-1851
Sonny Mack Mondays-Fridays, 2-6 p.m.; Cowboy Neil Mondays, Thursdays, 7-11 p.m.; and Saturdays, 2-6 p.m.; Sensation Band Tuesdays-Fridays, 7-11 p.m.; Fuzzy and the Kings of Memphis Saturday, 7-11 p.m.; Chic Jones and the Blues Express Sundays, 7-11 p.m.; North and South Band Wednesdays, 7-11 p.m.

Mud Island Amphitheatre
125 N. FRONT 576-7241
Norah Jones Thursday, June 8.

Midtown
Bar DKDC
964 S. COOPER 272-0830
Mighty Souls Brass Band Friday, June 9; Pig Star Saturday, June 10.

Biscos
2120 MADISON 432-2222
Sunday Brunch with Joyce Cobb Sundays, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

Canvas
1737 MADISON 443-5232
Karaoke Thursdays, 9:30 p.m.; Kyle Pruzina Live Mondays, 10 p.m.-midnight.

Celtic Crossing
903 S. COOPER 274-5151
Celtic Crossing Friday Patootie Sessions: Kyndle & Adam Friday, June 9, 6-9 p.m.; Dream Pop Funksters Saturday, June 10, 9 p.m.-midnight.

South Main
Ghost River Brewing
827 S. MAIN 278-0087
Paul Taylor Saturday, June 10, 6-9 p.m.; Sunday, Evening Slowdown with Luke White Saturday, June 11, 5-7:30 p.m.

Lollin Yard
7 W. CAROLINA
Electric Church Sundays, 2-4 p.m.
After Dark: Live Music Schedule June 8 - 14

Call: 940-762-2051 or Tune into 93.1 The Mix
www.mix931.com for updates!

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Hi-Tone
412-414 N. CLEVELAND 278-TONE
Jared & the Mill, The Rocketboys Thursday, June 8, 6:30 p.m.; Dylan Galvin and Vinnie Hines Sunday, June 11, 7-10 p.m.; Nick Black Friday, June 9, 8 p.m.; Puddle Pumkins, Vese Yariva Wednesday, June 14, 8 p.m.

Fridays;
Jared & the Mill, The Rocketboys

Dylan Galvin and Vinnie Hines Sunday, June 11, 7-10 p.m.; Nick Black Friday, June 9, 8 p.m.; Puddle Pumkins, Vese Yariva Wednesday, June 14, 8 p.m.

Rock Starkaraoke
Fridays; Jared & the Mill, The Rocketboys

Dylan Galvin and Vinnie Hines Sunday, June 11, 7-10 p.m.; Nick Black Friday, June 9, 8 p.m.; Puddle Pumkins, Vese Yariva Wednesday, June 14, 8 p.m.

EAST

Hi-Tone
412-414 N. CLEVELAND 278-TONE
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REAL PEOPLE
REAL NEEDS
REAL SOLUTIONS
Visit mifa.org to volunteer.

CALENDAR of EVENTS:
JUNE 8 - 14

THEATER
Circuit Playhouse
Ripcord, comedy that takes us to the Bristol Place Assisted Living Facility where foul-tempered Abby has just learned that she has to share her sunny top-floor room with newcomer Marilyn. www.playhouseonthesquare.org. $25-$40. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. Through June 25. 31 S. Cooper (726-0786).
The Evergreen Theatre
L.G.B.T.Q. Damned Funny evening of hilarity touching on a variety of subjects from gay conversion therapy to Britney Spears No. 1 fan and more. www.etcmemphistheater.com. $15. Sundays, 2 p.m.; Fridays, Saturdays, 8 p.m. Through June 17. 1709 Poplar (274-7199).
Hattiloo Theatre
Aids, an enslaved Nubian princess finds her heart entangled with an Egyptian soldier who is engaged to the Pharaoh’s daughter. www.hattiloo.org. June 9-July 2. 37 S. Cooper (903-2486).
Mainstage Theatre (University of Memphis)
The Comedy of Errors, set in Greece of 1600, two sets of identical twins separated shortly after birth find themselves (but not each other) in town on the same maddening day. (759-0948), www.thenahakepeare.org. $10-$34. Sundays, 3-5 p.m.; and Thursdays-Saturdays, 7-9 p.m. Through June 18. 1501 Union Avenue (682-7394).
Playhouse 51
Wifefreewell, stiff of sound mind, Esmerelda Quisp’s 80-year-old body is beginning to “come unglued,” as she puts it. www.playhouse51.com. Sundays, 2 p.m.; and Fridays, Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Through June 18. 4070Billedenville (872-7170).
Theatre Memphis
South Pacific, musical follows a nurse stationed on an island during World War II. www.theatrememphis.org. $30. Sundays, 2 p.m.; Fridays, Saturdays, 8 p.m.; and Thursdays, 7:30 p.m. Through June 25. 600 Perkins Expy. (942-8323).
TheatreWorks
Unseen City, an otherworldly conqueror claims the city of Memphis for his kingdom and sends a band of adventurers to survey the city. Ensemble of explorers and the audience re-imagine the city altogether. (274-1000). $12. Fridays, Saturdays, 8-9:30 p.m. Through June 24. 2055 Monroe (726-7199).
ARTIST RECEIPTIONS
Memphis College of Art Art reception for “Disappointed” and “Best in Class 2016/17,” exhibition of works by Josh Strydom and the best work from students in all grade levels. www.mcac.edu. Fri., June 9, 6-8:30 p.m. 1930 Poplar (272-5100).
WKNO Studio Artist reception for “A Little R & R Reflection & Retrospection,” exhibition of photography by Candace Sperman. www.wknomuseum.org. Fri., June 9, 6-8 p.m. 7151 Cherry Farms (458-2521).
Woman’s Exchange Tea Room

OTHER ART HAPPENINGS
Fashion Revival II BeeSpec Agency fashion show hosted by Tyra Nicole and celebrity stylist Harrison T. Crite. Live performance by Brennan Villines. Fri., June 9, 5-11 p.m.
The Moopnic Project Presents Benjamin Pierce New mural by Benjamin Pierce. Fri., June 9, 5-8 p.m.
“The Beer, Home by Midnight” Exhibition on the lives of Cara DiStefano and Joshua Strydom from their time in the City of One Hundred Spires, Prague, Czech Republic. Thurs., June 8, 6-9 p.m.

ONGOING ART
112 S. Main, in the Penobscot Square Building (522-ARTS).
Bingham and Broad “My Kin Is Not Like Yours,” exhibition of works by Debra Edge. Ongoing.
2563 Broad (323-3008).
57 Tillman (767-3800).

Memphis Botanic Garden “Love of Art” and “Memphis, Exhibition of work by Nikki Gardner and Debra Edge by appointment only. (647-9242). Ongoing.

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7.20 The Unlikely Candidates
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8.3 Walrus
8.10 Hillbilly Casino
8.17 Graceland Ninjaz

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MOST DAMN FUN IN TOWN
continued from page 22

Memphis Zoo

Metal Museum
"Metal in Motion," exhibition and group show of work involving moving parts including hand-operated or run on a motor inviting the viewer to interact with the art. Through Aug. 27.

"F.I.R.E. James Wade Jr.," exhibition of cast metal works and drawings by James Wade Jr. that investigate the meaning of place by referencing industrial, agrarian, and vernacular landscapes. Through July 16.

"Implements of Grandeur," exhibition of handmade tools by metalsmiths throughout the United States including Jack Brubaker, David Court, Dennis Duke, Jeffrey Funk, Seth Gould, Tom Latané, Timothy Miller, and others. Through July 30.

"A Little R & R: Reflection & Retrospection," photography by Candace Spearman at WKNO Studio, on Friday, June 9th, 6-8 p.m. CANDACE SPEARMAN AT WKNO STUDIO, ON FRIDAY, JUNE 9TH, 6-8 P.M.

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Kids and Kalimba
Eike Abioto with his Kalimba (thumb piano) pays homage to friend and singer Maurice White, Memphis native and founder of Earth, Wind and Fire. Tues., June 13, 1-2 p.m. STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC, 926 E. MCLEMORE (942-7685), WWW.STAXMUSEUM.COM.

Kids in the Garden
Will give kids ages 7-10 a chance to experience nature up close and learn the basics about planting and garden design. Snack and tools included. Reservations required: $10 members, $15 nonmembers. Sat., June 10, 10:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. THE DIXON GALLERY & GARDENS, 4339 PARK (761-5250), WWW.DIXON.ORG.

SPECIAL EVENTS
Aura Photos and Private Sessions with John Cappello
Offering private sessions and aura photos. $25-$100. Sun., June 11, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. THE BROOM CLOSET, 546 S. MAIN (437-9488), WWW.THEBROOMCLOSETMEMPHIS.COM.

The Commercial Appeal Sports Awards
Honors the most elite athletes in Memphis high school sports. $23. Fri., June 9, 7 p.m. THE ORPHEUM, 203 S. MAIN (252-3000), WWW. ORPHEUMMEMPHIS.COM.

Night at the Lorraine
Celebrate the history of the Lorraine Motel benefiting National Civil Rights Museum. Step back in time with an evening of food, music, and fun where B.B. King, Nat King Cole, Isaac Hayes, and others were guests. $75-$200. Fri., June 9, 8-11 p.m. THE ORPHEUM, 203 S. MAIN (252-3000), WWW. ORPHEUMMEMPHIS.COM.

OUTThiD: An Evening of Pure Imagination
Featuring wine and craft beer samples paired with scrumptious food, live music by the Bluff City Soul Collective, and silent and live auction items and experiences benefiting OUTMemphis. $50. Sat., June 10, 7-11 p.m. NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM, 450 MULBERRY (521-6699), WWW.CIVILRIGHTSMUSEUM.ORG.

Peabody Rooftop Party
Meet on the roof for music and fun. $10-$15. Thursdays, 6-10 p.m. Through Aug. 10. THE PEABODY HOTEL, 149 UNION (292-4000), WWW.PEABODYHOTEL.COM.

Food & Drink Events
5th Annual Cotton Bowl Brunch
Join the King and Queen of Carnival Memphis at a seated luncheon. Enjoy brunch and complimentary brunch cocktails, live music, and a special exhibition highlighting the history of Carnival Memphis. $50. Fri., June 9, 11:30 a.m. THE COTTON MUSEUM, 65 UNION (931-7286). WWW.MEMPHISCTTOWNMUSEUM.ORG.

Concoct
Make a drink and a masterpiece. For ages 21+. Register online. $40-$75. Sat., June 10, 5 p.m. SHELFY FARMS, 500 N. PINE LAKE (475-PARK). WWW.SHELFYFARMS.ORG.

Feast on the Farm
Evening of country charm with live and silent auction, dance band, and great food benefiting AgriCenter’s education programs. $125. Sat., June 10, 6-11 p.m. AGRICENTER INTERNATIONAL, 7777 WALNUT GROVE (737-1777), WWW.AGRICENTER.COM.

Food Truck Garden Party: Beach Party
Join the party featuring live music with Movie Night, cash bar, Play Zone, and food from the Memphis Food Truckers Alliance. Admission includes one drink ticket. $5 members, $10 nonmembers. Wed., June 14, 4-8 p.m. MEMPHIS BOTANIC GARDEN, 790 CHERY (601-4100). WWW.MEMPHISBOTANICGARDEN.COM.

Film
Bike-in Movie Benefiting UBFM: I.T.E.
Beer proceeds benefit Urban Bicycle Food Ministries. Free. Fri., June 9, 6-10 p.m. THE BIKESMITH, 509 N. HOLLIDAY (371-2453). WWW.BIKESMITHTRUCK.COM.

Breakfast At Tiffany’s
8 Thurs., June 8, 6 p.m. THE ORPHEUM, 203 S. MAIN (252-3000), WWW. ORPHEUMMEMPHIS.COM.

Chris Brown: Welcome To My Life
Also showing at Southaven’s Majestic and Cordova Cinema. Thurs., June 8, 7:30 p.m. MALCO PARADISO CINEMA, 584 S. MENDENHALL (862-1744), WWW.MALCO.COM.

K-Love Fan Awards: Ignite Hope
Tues., June 13, 7 p.m. MALCO PARADISO CINEMA, 584 S. MENDENHALL (862-1744), WWW.MALCO.COM.

The Sandlot
8 Sat., June 10, 1 p.m. THE ORPHEUM, 203 S. MAIN (252-3000), WWW. ORPHEUMMEMPHIS.COM.

A Stray
Desperate to outrun his bad luck, a young Muslim refugee seems like he just might make it, until he crosses paths with a stray dog. Wed., June 14, 7 p.m. CRYSTON ARTS, 430 N. CLEVELAND (567-8030). WWW.CROSSTONTNARTS.ORG.

Time Warp Drive-In
Movies start at dusk. See website for theme and movie line-up. Sat., June 10. MALCO SUMMER 4 DRIVE-IN, 5310 SUMMER (681-2020), WWW.MALCOM.COM.

Trosique, The Chosen Ones
Action-packed short film, dramatic stage play, and ferre runaway fashion show for a dynamic production welcoming a new era of fashion shows. $45. Sat., June 10, 5:30-9 p.m. THE HALLORAN CENTRE, 225 S. MAIN (609-9326).

A Wider Angle Film Series: Mad Tiger

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Hey Hey
On Mike Nesmith's memoir *Infinite Tuesday.*

Things I knew about Mike Nesmith before reading this book: He was the best songwriter and most interesting persona in the Monkees. His mother invented Liquid Paper and made a fortune. He was one of the first musicians to play country-rock. And he invented MTV, making one of the first music videos to promote his song "Rio" and conceiving of a show devoted to such videos, a show he wanted to call *Popclips.*

First, a few personal remarks. The second album I owned was *More of the Monkees* (the first was *Jefferson Airplane's Surrealistic Pillow*). I loved the "prefab four," but my nostalgia for them is not what makes me still listen to them today. The made-for-TV band, against all odds, made some great music. I also own every solo CD Nesmith ever made, even the obscure ones like *The Wichita Train Whistle Sings.* I think he is one of the most unappreciated songwriters in pop music. I love his songs from the Monkees albums, from "Sweet Young Thing" and "Papa Gene's Blues" to his ethereally beautiful "I Know What I Know" on their most recent album, *Good Times.* And I love his solo work, which I would put on a par with Stephen Stills’ or Lou Reed’s, to name two artists who started in a group and then made vital music afterward.

So, I came to his memoir *Infinite Tuesday: An Autobiographical Riff* (Crown Archetype, $28) with high hopes. I was not disappointed. Nesmith, as narrator of his own life, is engaging, intelligent, lyrical, and sincere. And it doesn’t hurt that he has quite a story to tell.

Rather than a linear approach he imparts his narrative nonconsecutively, in well-thought-out vignettes and portraits. He name-drops Timothy Leary, John Lennon, Jimi Hendrix, Jack Nicholson, and Johnny Cash, among others, but through all his tales runs a humility and genuineness that is disarming. And, even when he’s not talking about the Monkees or his solo career or his movie star friends, the vignettes are still fascinating because of this honesty and because he’s such a charming narrator. He’s equally appealing talking about his mother, his friends, his study of Christian Science, his interest in quantum physics. He knows what’s meat and what’s fat, and the book is decidedly low-fat.

And, eventually, it coalesces into a compelling chronicle, like a novel made from attractive mosaic shards.

If you’re looking for dirt on Micky, Peter, and Davy, you won’t find it here. Nesmith glosses over the Monkees years, mostly substituting self-deprecating feelings of otherness and disassociation for descriptions of on-set craziness or backstage peccadilloes. A reluctant TV star, he outlines some of the surrealistic events which created the show and, ultimately, led to its demise. He says "The creators of *The Monkees* may have thought they were creating a simple television property, a paean to the times, but what they were actually producing was Pinocchio. The show and all its parts and characters would come to life and begin to breathe and move and sing and play and write and think on their own. What had started as a copy of the 1960s became a fact of the 1960s. What had started as fanciful effect became casual fact.”

Along the way, he experienced some dark times, some periods of self-doubt and instability. He chronicles these gloomy days with grace and wit. Behind the accomplished rock star and actor lies a vulnerable human being, open-hearted and seeking, and I appreciated the opportunity to walk in his shoes for a while.

And, much later, discussing how he came up with the concept which would become MTV, about which he is characteristically humble, he says "To American eyes the little film was a white elephant, a trinket, fascinating and entertaining but with no apparent application among current television outlets. In the U.S., the music video had been born an orphan, without a place to be played." That, as we know, changed, and a monster was birthed, a monster that would change how folks listened to or thought about rock music.

And, finally, here is a one sentence fractal that can serve as a sum-up for Nesmith’s sometimes absurdist, sometimes moving, sometimes funny, always diverting autobiographical riffs, “I tiptoed through my inner world looking for the rules that governed, being careful not to damage the tulips.”
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couple weeks ago, we had a full-on Memphis meltdown after some nerd from Nashville began trolling us with a series of misspelled tweets and non-applicable GIFs (full disclosure: I am Nashville-born and mostly Nashville-raised, and this cretin offended even me). It was absolutely maddening, but here's the deal: That guy doesn't get it and never will, and that's just fine with me because that means he stays the hell out of Memphis and the hell out of bars like the Big S Grill. The Big S is Memphis through and through and embodies all this city has to offer, and it does it all in a tiny, unassuming house next to the train tracks.

1179 Dunnavant is stuck in time. It doesn't look like it has changed anything about itself since the '60s except for the name (formerly it was known as the Hawkins Grill). Indeed, the telephone directory hanging by the front door looked older than I am.

The Big S has six barstools, five tables, and three booths, keeping it intimate. We sat at the bar, where there were holes worn in the fabric from years of boot toes pressing into the sides. The place was dim, lit only by a few red lights. My buddy and I looked at each other. The Big S Grill was a winner.

There are a handful of things that make a bar: the music, the people, and the drinks. A bar doesn't require anything more than that, which is why it baffles the mind that so many bars are terrible. The Big S Grill scores a 10/10 in every category.

Sam Price (owner for 51 years) and his daughter, Aniese Cannon

The jukebox is packed with soul classics, and not one patron in there was under 60. But the drink of choice in the Big S is where the Memphis really comes through. We were served two 40-ounce bottles of beer with a chilled rocks glass and a napkin. A chilled rocks glass and a napkin! I dare you to find a better setup than that.

My friend and I were one of several people in there, but every other patron was an older gentleman. Just like with Ashton Kutcher, the headwear was evenly split between fedoras and trucker hats, but unlike Ashton Kutcher, none of these guys' hats made them look like assholes. In fact, any one of those guys could've been my
own grandfather, sitting there with a trucker hat perched on his head, barbecue sauce running down his arms as he ate his pulled pork sandwich at a gritty neighborhood bar. The Big S serves their barbecue from a smoker out front, and although we didn’t partake, we were the only ones in there not eating. It looked and smelled incredible.

Like many of these lesser-known dives, the Big S Grill allows folks to bring in their own liquor for a small fee. At a table nearby, three men were passing around a bottle of Smirnoff. The bartender had brought them beer mugs full of ice in which to make their mixed drinks. A whole beer mug for a vodka drink? Giddy up! My friend noticed one of them wearing a Memphis Tigers shirt and remarked, “I like your shirt.” The man replied, “You like the blue? You gotta like the blue if you’re in Memphis.” While the rest of us entitled jerks have been arguing about the Tigers since halfway through the Pastner era, the loyalty of the men of the Big S Grill has never even faltered.

We paid our tab, a beyond-reasonable $9 for two 40-ounce beers, and as we stood up to leave, the owner walked over and introduced himself. The Big S Grill has been run by the same folks, more or less, since the 1960s. This guy has surely seen the best and worst in people over the years, but greeted us as warmly as he would greet his own grandchildren. He called out, “Y’all come back now, you hear?” — just like in the movies — as we were walking out.

The next time we run across some Nashvillian — or any other city’s less-than-stellar example of a citizen — who wants to hurl racial slurs and lame jokes at Memphis, don’t let him win. Be glad that he’s off making some other city’s population dumber. Be happy that he doesn’t understand. Be thrilled that we’re taking the highest road, all while sitting in a low-ceilinged bar drinking beer with grandpas.

*The Big S, 1179 Dunnavant (775-9127)*

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**Hungry Memphis:**

A Very Tasteful Food Blog

by Susan Ellis

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SPIRITS

By Andria Lisle

A refreshing wine-based summer cocktail mixer.

Cappelletti
Cappelletti
A refreshing wine-based summer cocktail mixer.

Last month, I wrote about the enduring appeal and easy sophistication of Campari and soda — and then I walked into my favorite liquor store for a bottle of Campari and walked out with something I love even better: Cappelletti. Billed as a vino aperitivo, Cappelletti is, like Campari, a bitter, herbaceous mixer with a touch of citrus.

Both Campari and Cappelletti boast that gorgeous red color. Unlike Campari, Cappelletti is wine based rather than alcohol based, and, as a result, its finish is a bit smoother. Adding to its attraction, a bottle of Cappelletti costs much less than its legendary cousin. The bottle, too, is shaped uniquely — like a WW1-era morphine bottle, according to my savvy salesman. I’m not sure if it’s true, but it makes for a good story.

Since my indoctrination into the world of Cappelletti, I’ve noticed it on bar shelves across Memphis. At home, I prefer to drink it the easy way: over ice with soda, tonic, or Prosecco. At Acre in East Memphis, they up the ante by adding Cathead Vodka and tangerine to Cappelletti and sparkling wine for a cocktail called the End of the Line. Alchemy, at the north end of Cooper-Young, chose Cappelletti for its namesake cocktail, the Alchemist, which combines high-end bourbon, vermouth, and Peychaud’s Bitters with the aperitif. Cafe 1912, a few blocks up Cooper from Alchemy, has the familiar-shaped bottle on the liquor shelf behind the bar, where they’re happy to concoct a Cappelletti-based cocktail of your choice.

Now that the heat is here and farmers markets are in full swing, I’ve moved on to mixing Cappelletti with gin and basil, using a Tom Collins-esque cocktail I found on Food & Wine’s website. Simple to make, the drink has high flavor rewards. Combine an ounce of gin, an ounce of Cappelletti, a half-ounce of lemon juice, a quarter-ounce of simple syrup, and three basil leaves in a cocktail shaker with ice. Do your thing for a few moments, then double-strain into a tall glass with ice. Garnish with extra basil leaves and lemon slices, and voila! Summer drinking at its finest.

Dinah Sanders’ acclaimed cocktail book The Art of the Shim recommends a drink called the Teresa, which combines two ounces of Cappelletti, an ounce of lime juice, and three-quarters ounce of crème de cassis. Shake until well-chilled, letting some of the ice in the cocktail shaker dilute the alcohol, then enjoy.

Another great cocktail for your repertoire: the Ruby Diamond, which I found on Epicurious. This elegant drink combines gin, mescal, Cappelletti, lemon juice, and orange juice. The ingredients are shaken with ice, strained, and served in a chilled Champagne coupe.

You can’t go wrong with Cappelletti — unless, like me, you decide to share your favorite new liqueur on social media. I Instagrammed a few cocktails — the bottle and its vibrant label in the picture — and the next time I needed a bottle, the liquor store was out of stock.
n 1949, classics professor Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. He compared hundreds of different stories and myths from all over the world — from Gilgamesh to Perseus, Beowulf to Odysseus, Jesus to Mohammad — identifying common elements and structures that seemed to serve some universal psychological need. The hero is introduced in his Ordinary World; he is Called to Adventure but Refuses the Call, only to change his mind after a Meeting with the Mentor. Then he Crosses the Threshold into an unfamiliar world, meets Allies and faces Tests, which ultimately lead to a journey into the underworld where he faces an Ordeal and gains a Reward. But the Road Back is fraught with danger (usually a big chase scene), often resolved by a Leap of Faith, leading to a Resurrection, when the hero returns home, where he assumes his place in society as a wise and strong leader.

George Lucas read Campbell's work while a student at USC, and he applied Campbell's ur-structure to *Star Wars*. By the mid-'80s, the secret was out, and everyone in Hollywood was creating self-conscious versions of what Campbell called the “monomyth.” In as much as the Hero’s Journey got filmmakers to pay attention to story structure, it has been a good thing. But its ubiquity and the belief that it was a magic formula for success has created a stultifying sameness in screenplays.

The other problem with the Hero’s Journey is that it’s always about a he. There are goddesses aplenty, but female mythological heroes, such as the Greek huntress Atalanta, are rare. What happens when you test the monomyth by setting a woman on the Hero’s Journey?

Wonder Woman is the third-oldest surviving comic book hero. She made her debut as a Nazi-punching feminist eight years before Campbell’s book. And yet, 40 years after Christopher Reeve donned the Superman tights and 28 years after Tim Burton brought Batman to the big screen, we are only now seeing a Wonder Woman feature film. *Swamp Thing* got a movie before *Wonder Woman*, but maybe we had to wait for the stars to align for Diana Prince to get a treatment as good as Patty Jenkins’ film.

The only bright spot in the turgid *Batman v Superman* was Gal Gadot’s cameo as the Amazing Amazon. Now that she’s carried a $143 million production on her chiseled back, it’s clear Gadot is a movie star of the first water. Her jawline is more heroic than Ben Affleck, and her face is friendlier and more expressive than Henry Cavill. She’s just as great when she’s wrapping boy toy Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) in her magic lasso as when she’s storming across no man’s land in 1917 Belgium, but Gadot’s best scene is when the Amazon princess tries ice cream for the first time. Diana’s confident, determined gaze melts away for a moment, and we can see her think “maybe the World of Men isn’t so bad after all!”

Wonder Woman was formed from clay and given life by Zeus, but godlike perfection is boring, so Jenkins and writer Allan Heinberg use Diana’s naive wonder to endear her to the audience. *Wonder Woman* is a Hero’s Journey, but with its multiple flashbacks, it’s not a conventional one. Diana doesn’t Refuse the Call to heroism in the beginning — she waits until after she has seen the destruction of war and the corruption of men. For Diana’s Ordeal in the underworld where she faces an Ordeal, Jenkins and Heinberg turn to the Gospel of Matthew. Ares (David Thewlis) shows her the world and points out, correctly, that she’s not like these puny humans. If she wants to end suffering and impose order, she can do it by force and rule as the awesome queen she is.

Diana, like Jesus, rejects the temptation. Despite the fact that these humans — these men — don’t deserve her perfection, she’s got to do things the hard way. The difference between a tyrant and a hero is that a hero leads by example, and men — humans — follow willingly. That’s what it takes to bring about a paradigm shift, and that’s what the Hero’s Journey has always been about. Making the Hero with a Thousand Faces a woman proves the primal power of the oldest story by opening it up to half the world. After untold thousands of years, it still works. As we filed out of a packed matinee screening, I heard a teenage girl exclaim, “I’m ready to go kick some ass!”
FILM REVIEW By Chris McCoy

by Zeus, but godlike perfection is boring, so Jenkins and writer Allan Heinberg use Diana's na""""ive wonder to endear her to the audience. Wonder Woman is a Hero's Journey, but with its multiple flashbacks, it's not a conventional one. Diana doesn't refuse the call to heroism in the beginning she waits until after she has seen the destruction of war and the corruption of men. For Diana's ordeal in the underworld, Jenkins and Heinberg turn to the Gospel of Matthew. Ares (David Thewlis) shows her the world and points out, correctly, that she's not like these puny humans. If she wants to end suffering and impose order, she can do it by force and rule as the awesome queen she is.

Diana, like Jesus, rejects the temptation. Despite the fact that these humans these men don't deserve her perfection, she's got to do things the hard way. The difference between a tyrant and a hero is that a hero leads by example, and men humans follow willingly. That's what it takes to bring about a paradigm shift, and that's what the Hero's Journey has always been about. Making the Hero with a Thousand Faces a woman proves the primacy of the oldest story by opening it up to half the world. After untold thousands of years, it still works. As we filed out of a packed matinee screening, I heard a teenage girl exclaim, "I'm ready to go kick some ass!"

Wonder Woman Now playing Multiple locations
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On the Moon

Too many white people are detached from earthly reality.

I can’t pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
Ten years from now I’ll be payin’ still.
(while Whitey’s on the moon)
The man jus’ upped my rent las’ night.
(’cause Whitey’s on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
— “Whitey on the Moon,” Gil Scott-Heron, 1970

Imagine pledging allegiance to a nation that would rather you not exist, would gladly deny you the rights that you have earned for yourself 20 times over. Imagine being forced to watch from your hovels and tenements as the machine of progress trampled over any hope you had of an equitable future. Imagine being a citizen of a country or state or city that prioritized the feelings of some of its citizens over the realities of its majority. Imagine living in a “land of the free” that elected a national leader whose driving purpose seems to be to strip away the limited freedoms that exist for people unlike him and his family, all while fattening his pockets off the blood of the land. Imagine that this “land of the free” replicates these types of leaders at almost every level.

Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 poem “Whitey on the Moon” was a symbolic questioning of American achievement in the face of the social crises listed above. At the time he wrote this poem, our country’s goal was to win the Space Race, in part to establish our military supremacy and deflect any threats against our nation’s greatness. We funneled billions of taxpayer dollars, thousands of hours of labor, and tons of resources toward low-orbit supremacy, an undertaking that ran side-by-side with anti-racist, anti-poverty social movements. Civil rights movement leaders and poor black people alike wondered how America could devote so much time and effort to sending astronauts to space but not make any attempt to do right by oppressed populations.

Well, the answer is simple. Whitey’s always been on the moon.

When I say this, I don’t mean that American whites are actually on the moon. I mean that they are detached from earthly reality, and every bit of progress or protest by nonwhites shoves them further into space, where logic doesn’t exist. This is especially true now, when the halls of power are populated by white men who feel comfortable pandering to the most bigoted of populations and creating policy that reflects their oppressive beliefs. For too long in America, too many white Americans have believed that white people are the vanguards of progress, technological information, culture, and freedom. Only the moon- addled can look at our world and continue to think like this.

The number of white nationalist hate groups has spiked since November. The vast majority of hate crimes are now perpetrated against non-whites, immigrants, religious minorities, and members of the LGBT community. Every day it seems like there’s a video of a Muslim woman going to do her grocery shopping and being accosted by a soccer mom with the rage-flames of xenophobia in her eyes. People of color are being murdered by random, racist whites every other day in extremely violent ways. Bystanders and good Samaritans are being slashed and stabbed by white men who armor themselves in the flag and see themselves as defenders of white American ideals. Corporations — many of them led by moon-addled white folks and enabled by white politicians — make it their policy to destroy access to wealth from workers, to keep them laboring and sick and fearful.

Other groups in this country — the groups who are often on the receiving end of white folks’ moon-borne oppression — are made to feel like they are the problem with American culture. If they didn’t practice their heathen religions, if they didn’t have those weird cultural traditions, if they would just be white, then these problems with oppression wouldn’t exist and everyone would be free.

What really sucks about this condition of white moon-blindness is that you’re always prepared for it, but it can still catch you unawares even though it is innocuous, and any white person can simply decide to let it rip, leaving you either stuck wishing you had said the right thing, facing the judgmental stares of your peers, or even, sometimes, dead. And with one of the moonniest white men in the United States currently occupying the position of president, every moon-wild bigot in the country — and even some moon-wild non-bigots — will be in rare form. They’ll be invading your neighborhoods and communities, getting you arrested and moving their friends into your grandparents’ homes. They’ll be following you around, yelling racial slurs at you, and then trying to kill you when you fight back. They’ll be casually offensive toward you or pass laws to disenfranchise you or consume your culture until there’s nothing left, but you’ll be sure that you’re the problem and not them.

Troy L. Wiggins is a Memphis writer whose work has appeared in the Memphis Noir anthology, Make Memphis magazine, and The Memphis Flyer.