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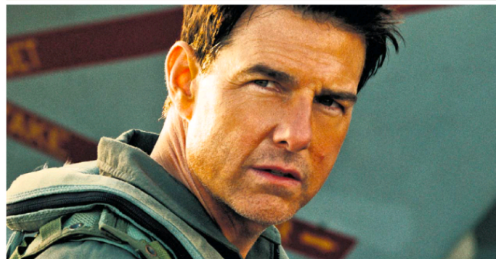
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CALUM MARSH | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK



Tom Cruise, blockbuster king, from top: "Mission: Impossible"; "Top Gun: Maverick"; and "Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol."

"IN ORDER TO DO MY JOB" Ben Stiller, as Tom Cruise's stunt double Tom Cruise, poses in a video made for the 2000 MTV Movie Awards. "I have to ask myself: Who is Tom Cruise? What is Tom Cruise? Why is Tom... Cruise?"

This is a tricky line of questioning. Onscreen, Cruise is unmistakably our biggest movie star, as the New York Times reporter Nicole Sperling recently explained — the last true exponent of a century-old studio system that has been steadily eroded by the rising forces of franchise filmmaking and streaming. His powerful charisma and daredevil stunts work have combined, yet again, in his latest hit, "Top Gun: Maverick," bringing it past the \$1 billion mark. Offscreen, Cruise is elusive. He is the frequent public mouthpiece for a cryptic, controversial religion that seems harder to understand the more he talks about it. He is intensely secretive about the details of his private life. Even when he makes the occasional effort to seem like an ordinary, rela-

His Mission: A Devotion To Movies

Tom Cruise lives for the big screen as a star and a quality control manager.

able guy he winds up sounding like an A.I. approximation of one. Asked by *Movieflick* magazine to describe his most memorable filmdoing experience, Cruise couldn't name one. ("I love movies," he said, very normally.) When asked which team he was rooting for at a *Giants-Dodgers* game he attended last fall, he replied, "It's a fan of baseball."

It can be hard to reconcile these disparate sides. So it is worth considering the question "Who is Tom Cruise?" Much of his early success as an actor, through the 1980s and '90s, was predicated on a certain down-earth charm. The sexed-up, troublemaking young Cruise of "Risky Business," the glibly, endearingly naive Cruise of "Cocktail," and the technician, morally principled Cruise of "Jerry Maguire" each relied on his ability to convincingly embody the American Everyman, the sympathetic heartthrobs the audience could desire or root for. Around the turn of the century, he complicated that image by

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'Celebration' Wasn't Their Only Hit

A new boxed set makes the case for Kool & the Gang.

BY STEVE KINOPFER
"Do something," the producer Gene Redd instructed the drummer George Brown and the bassist Robert Bell during an early recording session in New York. "Say something! Sing something!"
That prompt in the late '60s was what Kool & the Gang — a jazz group with a crack horn section that evolved into funk, then transitioned to disco — needed to get moving. "Right off the top of the heads," Brown, 73, said of group's early years, when it was making instrumental tracks influenced by both James Moody and James Brown. "We'd just start, and bingo, there it is: 'Raw Hamburger' and 'Chocolate Bummer.'" he added, referring to two tracks. "It just flowed. And we're just grooving."
Over nearly six decades, Kool & the Gang have released 25 albums and toured world-

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Looking for a Laugh in a War-Torn Country

At a comedy club in Ukraine, the humor can be bittersweet.

BY DAVID SEGAL
LYN, UKRAINE — Some marvels of news are so grim and absurd that they sound like they were conceived in the warped imagination of bored satirists. Like the headline from Belarus a few weeks ago, reporting that 10th graders there were being taught how to aim rifles — using shovels.
"What do you think about that?" asks the comedian Vadym Dzitanko.
Dzitanko is onstage with two other comedians and a well-known singer. All are seated and holding microphones, gamely trying to find humor in a place and at a moment when the tragic is trouncing the funny by a spectacular margin.
It's a recent Saturday night at the Club Comedy Hall, a comedy club in downtown Lviv, near Ukraine's relatively peaceful western border. Some 100 people have spent about \$15 apiece to see, drink and listen to comics riffing about whatever crosses their minds, which is often the latest news about the war with Russia. Or in the case of this show, as the business, the topic is the oddness of life in Belarus, a dictatorship a mere 150 miles to the north.

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A recent Saturday night at the Club Comedy Hall in downtown Lviv, Ukraine. The shows are also available on YouTube.

PHOTO TOP BY AP/WIDEWORLD; BOTTOM BY AP/WIDEWORLD; COURTESY OF THE CLUB COMEDY HALL

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PHOTOGRAPH BY EMILE DICKER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Looking for a Laugh in a War-Torn Country

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“What do you expect from a country where a potato is a weapon?” says the comedian Oleksandr Dmytrovych. Then he imagines an instructor, giving tips to the kids.

“We can’t give you rifles yet—” “Because we only have one,” finishes the third comic, Maksym Kravets.

This is Cultural Defense, an evening of unscripted and free-flowing humor staged in Lviv every few nights. It began two weeks after the Russian invasion, when Kravets, a Ukrainian intelligence officer by day and a comedian by night, called the co-creator of the show, Bohdan Vakhnash, and pointed out that the Cult Comedy Hall was in a basement.

“I said, ‘You know, the place is a bomb shelter,’” recalled Kravets, a burly and bearded 42-year-old.

Kravets, wearing a T-shirt with “Wildness” on it, and Dmytrovych were sitting in another room in the club after the show recently. Initially, they said, they were not sure anyone in the country was in the mood for chuckles. The shock of the invasion was then fresh and hundreds of thousands of residents from the eastern part of the country were fleeing into the city.

“Before the first show, we thought, maybe this isn’t the right time for comedy,” said Dmytrovych, who is 30 and bearded, too. “Without beads we’re ugly” he explained.

“We were perfid;” he went on. “But after the first show, we came and sat in this room and realized people want to laugh. They want to hear jokes about our enemy. From that first night, we understood this would be bigger than we had thought.”

There has been exactly one international breakout star in Ukrainian comedy and he happens to be the president of the country, Volodymyr Zelensky. If this puts pressure on others in the business, it wasn’t obvious onstage one Saturday night, when nobody seemed especially pressed to land on a punchline and a singer, Mykhailo Khoma, spent a lot of time rambling about his childhood.

Ukraine has long had a modest live-comedy scene, though anyone accustomed to the standard setup at American clubs will find novelty in the show’s format. There’s no warm-up act, and at no point is anyone standing onstage alone. There are different guests every night. The evening starts with four men leading a raucous call and response in Ukrainian, like the rest of the show.



Hosts: “Glory to the Nation!” Audience: “Death to enemies!” Hosts: “Ukraine!” Audience: “Above all else.” Hosts: “Putin!” Audience: Unprintable put-down!

After that, the stars take their seats and start to talk. Some of the humor is self-deprecating. In a previous show — they’re all available on YouTube — Dmytrovych riffed about the news that Ukrainian soldiers had mastered a “single use” anti-tank missile called an NLAW. This was amazing, he said, because by nature and necessity, Ukrainians are accustomed to reusing everything, over and over.

“I got slippers in a hotel in Egypt a year and a half ago and I’m still wearing them,” he said. “When they got dirty, I washed them. When they fell apart in the washing machine, I glued them together. Now these are slippers I offer to guests.”

There are plenty of jokes at the expense of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, who is scorned as a blustery idiot who underestimated the spirit and resolve of Ukrainians. The Russian military, on the other hand, is largely spared. The point, explained Dmytrovych, isn’t to belittle the invading forces, which Ukrainians regard as formidable and horrifying. It’s to lift the spirits of people who are not on the front lines, or who might have once lived near the front lines and have since relocated.

So during one show, Kravets extolled the surprising polished beauty of checkpoints in Lviv (“I would not be surprised if they served laters”), some of which have exceptionally long lines. (“I thought at the beginning they would take my order and at the end I’d be handed a Big Mac.”)

Internal politics are a recurring theme. During a show a few weeks ago, a poll was cited that found 90 percent of Ukrainians want to join the European Union.

“What is the first thing you will do when we join the European Union?” an onstage guest asked.

“Look for the 10 percent who didn’t want to join the European Union,” despondent Dmytrovych. “Who are these people?”

The shows double as fund-raisers for Ukraine’s war effort. Every performance is live-streamed on YouTube and viewers can send donations online. Throughout the evening, a host who’s offstage shares details of some of the larger donations, along with messages for the performers. On this Saturday night, one donor needed the hosts for the charity of jokes.

The goal for the evening was to raise enough money to buy a car for border guards, and by the time the audience headed home, about an hour before the war-imposed 11 p.m. curfew, the goal was nearly reached. Over more than 50 shows, Cultural Defense has raised close to \$70,000.

The crowd at these shows skews young, with most in the 20- to 35-year-old range. There are rows of seats picked near the stage and tables in the rear for those who want to sample Cult’s menu, which, somewhat incongruously, leads with a long list of sushi offerings, including rolls and nigiri. In brief interviews before the show, a few spectators said that the onslaught of depressing news made laughter seem essential.

“I think it’s a throw for one,” said Petro Diavoliuk, who was drinking and eating with friends. “All the money goes to the Army, people relax and it’s cheaper than a shrink.”

Even here, though, reality intrudes. A few minutes before the final ovation on this Saturday night, a number of mobile phones simultaneously began to emit the classic air raid siren, that rising and falling sound that is a staple of every World War II movie in which soldiers scramble ahead of an attack. Everyone checked their phones, and opened an app — several are available — that tracks government warnings about missile strikes.

“Warning! Air alarm!” read a text in both Ukrainian and English on a Telegram channel called Notifications CD, for civil defense. Nobody seemed remotely concerned, and the flow of onstage chatter didn’t pause for a moment. Air alarms are pretty frequent in Lviv; there have been 10 during Cultural Defense shows. And anyway, the place is a certified bomb shelter. If there were genuine danger, this would be a fine place to wait it out.

An hour or so later, well after the show had ended, a second message appeared: “The air alarm is stopped.”

During a post-show interview, both comedians said they hoped the war ends before the fall, for purely careerist reasons. They’ve got some corporate gigs lined up in other countries and as long as hostilities rage, men are barred from leaving the country.

This was a joke. Humor in Ukraine is both a prayer for normalcy and a form of resistance. It is also, some, uniquely fortifying. As Dmytrovych put it, “For as long as we’re laughing, we’re not giving up.”

U.S. Open To Feature Sculptures By 5 Artists

Works by creators from marginalized communities will be displayed.

By KALIA RICHARDSON
Armory Off-Site, a program of the Armory Show, has teamed up with the United States Tennis Association to showcase sculptural works at the U.S. Open by five artists from marginalized communities.

The works will be displayed throughout the site of the Open, the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, in late August and early September.

The partnership builds on the U.S. Open social justice campaign spearheaded by the tennis association’s managing director of marketing, Nicole Kankam. With diversity, inclusion and respect as cornerstones of the campaign, in 2020 the tennis association, which owns and operates the U.S. Open, displayed the work of 18 artists who identify as Black, Indigenous or people of color, in the front, empty seats of Arthur Ashe Stadium.

“It’s all built around this one groundbreaking statement: When you keep an open mind, great things can happen in our sport and out in the world,” Kankam said of the campaign.

The artists whose works will be showcased this year include Jose Davila, who is represented by the Sean Kelly gallery; Myles Nurse, who is represented by the Half Gallery; Carojn Salas, represented by Mrs. gallery; Luzene Hill of K Art; and Gerald Chukwuma, with Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery. Each artist will produce one work, with some pieces containing several parts. (The work will be for sale.)

Chukwuma, who incorporates elements of the Ubi art tradition from southeastern Nigeria in his sculptural work, uses his pieces to represent voluntary and forced global migration.

“For Africa and for Africans, I think migration has done a lot,” Chukwuma, who is from eastern Nigeria, said in an interview. “It has not just scattered us all over the world, it has watered down our culture. It has watered down what we believe in, it has watered down who we are.”

Chukwuma intends to present a sculpture from a series of his that revisits the 19th-century landing, in that early 19th-century landing, about 75 newly enslaved West Africans took control of a coastal vessel, grounded the ship and later marched into the waters of Dunbar Creek in Georgia, committing mass suicide.

He said he is glad that the work is going to be shown in the United States. His series will eventually consist of 75 sculptures, for the enslaved Africans who rebelled. “So I think that that’s a beautiful thing,” he said. “There’s liberation there.”

Three of the five artists will create work especially for the U.S. Open, including a sculpture by the Indigenous artist Luzene Hill. The work, “To Rise and Begin Again,” is made up of undulating columns that symbolize the upward push of Cherokee sovereignty, defying efforts to crush it. Each column was a letterpress piece with a Cherokee syllabary to spread awareness of the written language.

“We’re still here, and we’re keeping up,” she said. Hill said in an interview that she was honored and humbled to have her work displayed for a larger audience.

In partnering with the tennis association, Armory Off-Site is striving to reach people who may be unfamiliar with the annual Armory Show, said Nicole Berry, the Armory Show’s executive director.

Armory Off-Site began last September with a mission to introduce international contemporary artists to a wider audience.

“Hopefully we’ll create some art lovers out of the tennis fans,” Berry said, “and maybe vice versa.”



“To Rise and Begin Again” by Gerald Chukwuma, is among the creations that will be shown at the U.S. Open.

THEATER DIRECTORY

Your daily guide to theater

BROADWAY OFF-BROADWAY

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JEOPARDY!

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