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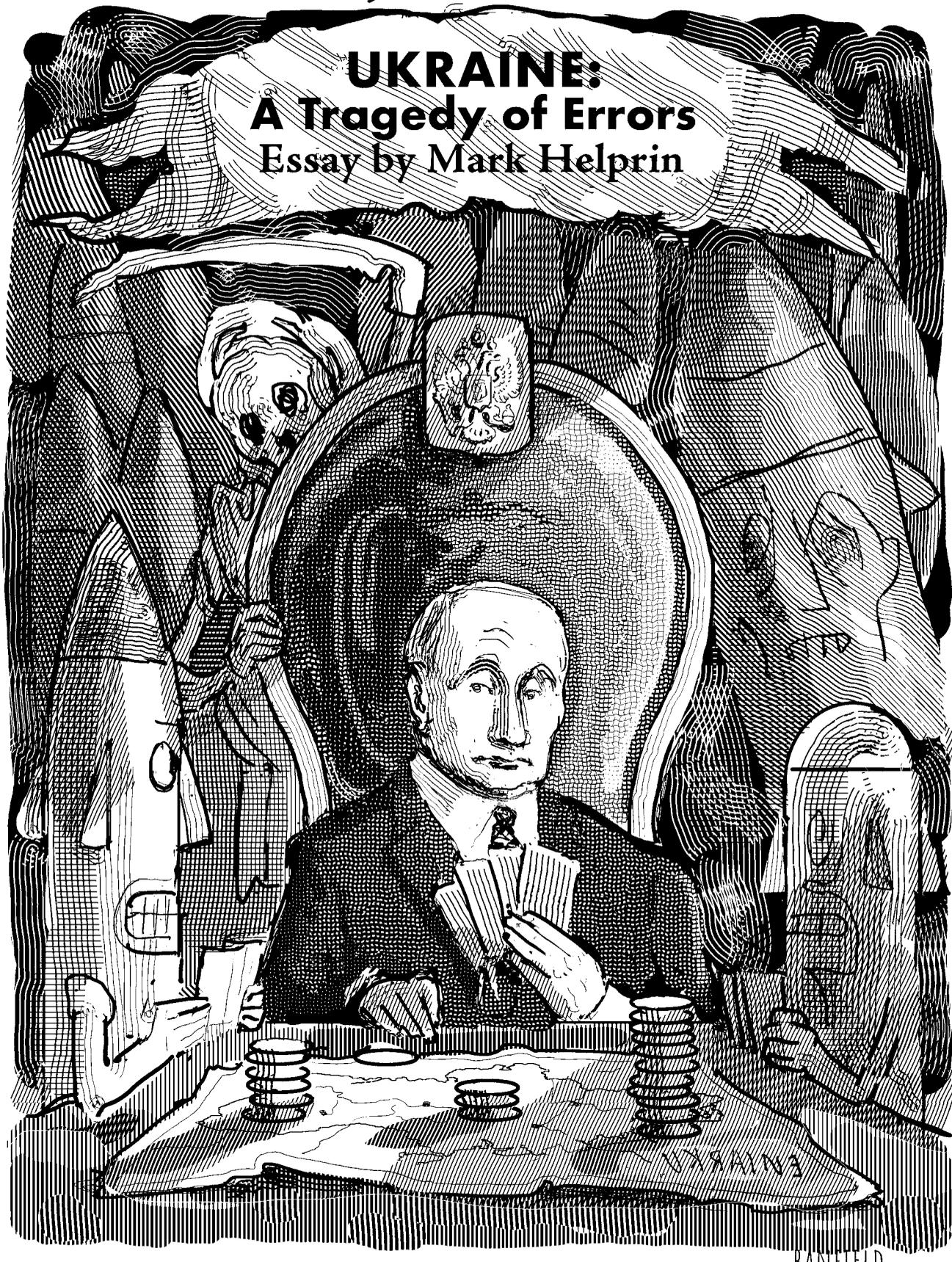
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## PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



# Oscars Wild

**M**Y MOTHER WAS AN ACTRESS AND MY FATHER MADE WHAT he still called “motion pictures”—because when he was a boy pictures didn’t move. “Movie,” if you think about it, is an even quainter term. Did I mention that his first car was a horse and that he called helicopters “autogyros”? When we went to buy a “Victrola” he asked the young salesman if it came with “horns,” and after a moment the answer was, “Yeah man, you can listen to anything you want!”

Given what my parents did, they watched the Oscars professionally, so I did, too: I was in charge of moving the aerial when the picture turned into a zebra. But even as a *tabula rasa* I questioned the attraction of the Oscars—much as I did of cigarettes—and stopped watching them soon after they were first televised. And this was in the days of high-quality dramas such as *On the Waterfront*, *Marty*, and *A Man for All Seasons*, and epics such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, all of which won Best Picture.

Even then there was a great *odeur* of self-congratulation putrefying into spectacle. Yes, we go to movies (or rather, movies come to us), which are important. We also go to dentists, who are important, but did the American Dental Association televise the award of its gold medal to Martha Somerman, D.D.S., Ph.D., and, to paraphrase a recent Best-Picture title, 50 years a dentist?

Then as now, the Oscars were a great show of breasts and tuxedos, the former outnumbering the latter by approximately two to one. If modern feminists have ever been right about anything it certainly includes the pathos of offering one’s body for display (Arnold Schwarzenegger, take note). Must America be yearly disgraced as Hollywood preens over itself like a self-basting chicken, even if such interest is in sharp decline?

The recent Oscars have done a remarkable imitation of both the vaunted individuality of a Chinese Communist Party Peoples’ Congress and the freewheelingness of a debate with Kim Jong Un. Hollywood was once horribly racist, so to make up for this it has become once again horribly racist, with rigid quotas across all categories of subject, employment, and awards. It once blacklisted those who stupidly but not illegally belonged or had belonged to the Communist Party. Now as best it can it excludes conservatives, who, lest they never work again, must meet in secret groups as if they are 19th-century Bulgarian anarchists. And it, too, keeps lists. When I was informed by the (screen) Writers Guild of America that I had fallen under their—obviously hallucinated—“jurisdiction,” I discovered what they called their (“confidential”) “Unfair List” of 172 names from The Brothers Four to Roger Vadim (who *was* unfair to Brigitte Bardot). They don’t say what to do with it, but perhaps if Joe McCarthy rises from the dead he can tell them.

**B**ECAUSE OF THE RECENT OSCAR BROUHAHA IN THE NEWS, after almost 70 years I was suddenly awakened, like Rip Van Winkle, to their present form. Had there been a police report it might have read like this: “*In front of a large mob, victim greeted perpetrator’s wife, who suffers from alopecia, with a joke about baldness. The perp, who is well known and easily recognizable, laughed at first but upon registering spouse’s distress mounted stage and struck victim with open-handed blow commonly known as a ‘bitch slap.’ Victim remained standing and did not seek medical attention. Perp returned to seat and resumed assault verbally, twice threatening victim. Despite felony assault and battery in the presence of approximately 16 million witnesses, on advice of supervising officer we took no action. Because the perp was surrounded by a large number of his homies, the captain said that intervention would be too dangerous and might lead to a riot, as they were armed with what he called ‘Guccis.’*”

Ancient movies confirm that, long ago, men struck with a closed fist and women slapped. But who is to say what is a man and what is a woman, unless you ask xi and xi tells you (not Xi Jinping)? Slapper and slappee were black. Thus, unable to identify either a victim or victimizer, the crowd was confused. Had slapper been black and slappee white, the audience would have found nothing amiss. Both slapper and slappee white, and the scandal would have been old-fashionedly delicious. Slapper white and slappee black would have signaled the birth of protests, a movement, heartfelt confessions, articles, books, and professorships, really.

But that night the mob did experience catharsis when three unknown (to me) women took the stage, objecting to Florida legislation that prohibits teaching about homosexuality and transgenderism to children as young as five—which its opponents characterized as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, although it says nothing of the kind. Taking the characterization literally, these Vestal Virgins began to incant the word *gay* simultaneously and repeatedly. Although they were addressing only something conjured in their imaginations, and although it used to be that adults who wanted to talk about sex to other people’s young children were arrested, the elite arbiters of taste in the audience—if one is to believe the panning shots—erupted in wild applause and coy smiles of triumph. What was especially chilling about it was that in this tropism of conformity very much in the spirit of the new, self-inflicted form of totalitarianism, unlike the mechanically enthusiastic North Koreans, they seemed actually to enjoy it.

I did not. Instead, I remembered the relative dignity, restraint, and sanity of the Academy Awards I had last seen, and almost wished that it was again 1955, when *On the Waterfront* took the title, and the young Eva Marie Saint was as fresh and demure as the hopes for what, after the horrors of the Second World War, America might have become. Who knows? We coulda been a contenda.

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