

THE NEW YORKER

IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

How Do You Go About Reforming an Utterly Corrupt Political System?

In the September 5, 2016, issue of *The New Yorker*, in “After the Revolutions” (p. 40), **Joshua Yaffa** reports from Kiev on the journalists turned politicians Sergii Leshchenko and Mustafa Nayyem, who, in the wake of the 2013-14 Maidan revolution, are working to reform Ukraine’s corrupt political system. In 2004, Viktor Yanukovich won a hotly contested Presidential runoff before widespread protests and accusations of election rigging prompted a new election, in which he was defeated. Then, in 2010, he took office as President. His return to power was guided by the American political strategist Paul Manafort, Donald Trump’s former campaign manager, who helped to reinvent Yanukovich as a businesslike manager. Leshchenko tells Yaffa that Manafort “tried to create fissures within Ukrainian society and use them to score political points.” Leshchenko recalled seeing Manafort at Yanukovich’s inauguration, on a snowy day in February, 2010—the strange, lone American who had somehow ended up at the center of Yanukovich’s entourage. In 2013, it was widely assumed that Yanukovich would sign a long-awaited trade-association agreement with the European Union; when he announced that he would not sign it, the country was stunned. In a post on Facebook, Nayyem urged people to gather at the Maidan, Kiev’s central square, to protest the decision. Soon, thousands had assembled; the historiography of the Maidan uprising credits Nayyem’s post with sparking the demonstrations.

As muckraking journalists, Nayyem and Leshchenko felt frustrated by the political system’s resistance to reform. At the urging of the Stanford political scientist Francis Fukuyama, they decided that they could be more effective as politicians. Along with the activist Svitlana Zalishchuk, they asked Yanukovich’s successor as President, Petro Poroshenko, if he would find seats for them in parliament, and he agreed to do so. “The usual image of a Ukrainian member of parliament is a guy with a big belly and a lot of money, sitting in the Rada deciding people’s destinies,” Zalishchuk said. “But Sergii and Mustafa are two young, stylish guys—hipsters—who are the antithesis of the old style of Ukrainian politics.” In late June, along with Zalishchuk and several other young reformers, the two men announced that they would be launching a new movement. The founding platform calls for “transforming Ukraine into a modern European country.” Nayyem tells Yaffa, “Poroshenko played a small game. It’s not worthy of the kind of leader we wanted to see after Maidan.”

In spite of Leshchenko and Nayyem’s dedication, corruption persists. Yaffa writes, “Oligarchs funnel much of their profits back into the political system, which they use as an arena to resolve disputes and insure their continued privileges.” This summer, Leshchenko showed Yaffa the Manafort ledgers, which revealed that Manafort was marked down to receive twenty-two payments—many of them opaque, such as a million dollars for “services”—totalling more than twelve million dollars. (Manafort has denied receiving the payments.) Leshchenko found it amusing that Manafort’s past had become a central issue in American politics, telling Yaffa, “Sooner or later, it was going to come out.” On August 19th, Leshchenko held a press conference in Kiev, where he pointed out that none of the payments intended for Manafort had been officially registered or taxed, which in his view meant that they were illegal. A few hours later, Manafort resigned from the Trump campaign.

Yuja Wang Is Known for the Brilliance of Her Playing and the Drama of Her Outfits

In “Performance Artist” (p. 50), **Janet Malcolm** profiles the twenty-nine-year-old pianist Yuja Wang, a prodigy who tours the world playing in premier halls, in solo recitals or with leading orchestras. It’s not just her playing that sets her apart; it’s also what she wears—typically, short, tight dresses or long, clingy ones, always with four-inch stilettos, which capture the attention of reviewers and audiences alike. In February, on four successive nights at Geffen Hall, at Lincoln Center, in New York, Wang played Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-Flat Major with the New York Philharmonic, under the Swiss conductor Charles Dutoit. Of her performance on the opening night, Gary Graffman—the retired head of the Curtis Institute, in Philadelphia, and Wang’s former teacher—tells Malcolm, “Who can play Mozart the way she did? It was so natural, in such good taste. Not that she was doing anything. That’s just the way it came out.” Wang jokes that Mozart is “like a party animal,” but she also sees his music as “noble, tragic, like a great Greek play.” On the second night, she walked onstage in a girlish pink dress that was a deviation from her typical performance attire. Malcolm mentions that, to her, the performance seemed less inspired, and Wang admits, “Because of that dress . . . because it’s so different from everything I’ve ever worn, I didn’t really feel myself, and maybe that came through.” For Wang, whose career has been built on the “hot-blooded” Russian composers, as she calls them—Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky—Mozart was a departure. In another departure, in May, at Carnegie Hall, she played Beethoven’s extremely long and difficult Sonata No. 29 in B-Flat, known as the “Hammerklavier,” in a dark-blue-green sequined dress with a long train on one side and nothing on the other, so that her right thigh and leg were completely exposed. When Malcolm asked why Wang had selected the “Hammerklavier,” she said that she wanted to prove that she could play the most difficult of Beethoven’s sonatas. Of her new repertoire, Wang tells Malcolm, “It makes me happy playing ‘Hammerklavier’ rather than playing Rach 3 another twenty times. I used to only play pieces I was comfortable with and good at, Rachmaninoff, Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky. Now I propose music I won’t be comfortable with. This is the only way to get out of my skin, out of myself, and to learn.”



How the Upright Citizens Brigade Improvised a Comedy Empire

In “You Had to Be There” (p. 24), **Emma Allen** examines how the improvisational-comedy group the Upright Citizens Brigade, formed in the nineties, has developed into a lucrative comedy behemoth, and recounts what she learned from taking a U.C.B. improv class. “Over the last ten years, U.C.B. went from being sort of the Rebel Alliance to being the Empire,” Ben Furnas, a policy analyst who participates in U.C.B. competitions, tells Allen. “Today, with YouTube and Twitter providing a constant audience, humor is anyone’s game,” Allen writes. Countless successful people in Hollywood, including Ellie Kemper, Abbi Jacobson, Ilana Glazer, Adam McKay, and Aubrey Plaza, got their start at U.C.B., although anyone willing to pay can take a class. “Like starting a band in the sixties, or joining a cult in the seventies, or enrolling in business school in the eighties, or going to group therapy in the nineties, taking improv classes has become the default activity for today’s postgraduate seekers,” Allen writes.

But, while the full U.C.B. curriculum costs at least sixteen hundred dollars, even the lucky few who are accepted to join the house teams, and perform on U.C.B.’s stages, are not compensated. Last year, U.C.B. trained twelve thousand students—that’s about five million dollars in revenue. The company’s four founders don’t take a salary, and they argue that the revenue helps keep ticket prices low and allows them to pay the touring company and teachers and to invest in growth. Nate Dern, a senior writer for *Funny or Die*, believes that the costs and the lack of compensation have factored into a dearth of onstage diversity. “We live in a sexist and racist society, and even something as great as U.C.B. doesn’t exist in a vacuum,” he tells Allen. Hence, “a lot of straight white guys on house teams.”

Last year, Allen enrolled in a series of eight improvisational-comedy classes at U.C.B., where she learned about the elaborate protocol for a long-form improv scene, techniques like “agreement” (“yes, and”), and the Harold, an improv structure in which themes and characters recur in subsequent scenes. “I felt that the class had made me a more careful listener, and that I recovered better after doing something embarrassing in public, like falling on an icy sidewalk,” she writes. Some U.C.B. alumni whom Allen spoke with likened the effects of classes to immersion therapy, meditation, and “creative cross-training.” Mark Thompson, a former investment banker who enrolled at U.C.B., tells Allen that it changed his life. “I learned to not worry about the outcome, to just trust the process.” Allen speaks with Amy Poehler, the most high-profile of the U.C.B. founders. “We all think we’re in control of our lives, and that the ground is solid beneath our feet, but we are so wrong,” Poehler says. “Improvising reminds you of that over and over again.”

How the Queer Collective Hood By Air Creates Its Bracingly Aggressive Designs

In “The Street Silhouette” (p. 32), **Christopher Glazek** profiles the New York designer Shayne Oliver and his fashion collective, Hood By Air, which has a cult following among affluent teen-agers, avant-garde adults, and pop stars, among them Rihanna, Justin Bieber, and Kanye West. In 2006, after dropping out of the Fashion Institute of Technology, Oliver launched Hood By Air with his friend Raul López, and by 2007 their clothes had begun showing up in boutiques in downtown Manhattan. Oliver believed that he could turn streetwear basics—such as oversized hoodies and multipocketed jackets—into high-concept luxury items. He embarked on a conceptual exploration that he calls “formalizing sloppiness,” highlighting the transitional phases between dressed and undressed. He liked conjuring those alluringly awkward moments when an amorous couple still have a few items of clothing on, telling Glazek, “The idea of that being so open and so vulnerable—it’s, like, ‘Where’s my pants? Where’s my underwear?’” By the end of 2009, López and Oliver had put Hood By Air on hiatus; in 2012, Oliver relaunched the brand with the filmmaker Leilah Weinraub. Weinraub took on the title of C.E.O. in part so that she would be taken as seriously as a man would be. She tells Glazek, “If I were just Shayne’s friend, and a woman, and *me*, people would just be, like, ‘O.K., bitch, get the fuck out of the way.’” Since the relaunch, Hood By Air’s sales have doubled every season. A bomber jacket sells for nearly a thousand dollars; a T-shirt with the H.B.A. logo costs six hundred dollars.

Last fall, Glazek attended the runway show for Galvanize, Hood By Air’s new collection, at Penn Plaza Pavilion. Glazek writes, “Galvanize was an homage to the expanding cohort of shoppers who use clothing to revise standard images of race and gender . . . a rich white woman can wear a Hood By Air garment and feel modern because it makes her look like a poor black man; a poor black man can wear it and feel modern because it makes him look like a rich white woman.” Sally Singer, the creative digital director of *Vogue*, tells Glazek that Hood By Air had presented one of the season’s top collections. In March, items from Galvanize began to arrive in stores. Barneys New York installed life-size silicon replicas of six Hood By Air models in its windows on Madison Avenue—the first time that the windows had featured mannequins in menswear. Inside the store, the Hood By Air racks were filled with logo tees. Glazek writes, “The runway pieces may have blown fashion critics’ minds, but it was the T-shirts that had changed the way people dressed.”

Plus: In Comment, **Steve Coll** considers the haunting image of Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old Syrian boy who survived an air strike in Aleppo, and how it has crystallized both Syrian suffering and the ongoing opposition to the Assad regime (p. 17); in The Financial Page, **James Surowiecki** examines what the withdrawal of big insurers like Aetna means for Obamacare (p. 22); in Shouts & Murmurs, **Hallie Cantor** imagines your anxiety’s fall TV lineup, including “Extreme Home Jealousy” and “Saturday Night at Home” (p. 31); **Carrie Batten** examines Frank Ocean’s new three-part work: a forty-five-minute video titled “Endless,” a magazine called *Boys Don’t Cry*, and an experimental album called “Blonde” (p. 68); **Adam Kirsch** reads Anthony Gottlieb’s new book, “The Dream of Enlightenment,” and considers why, given all our modern technological breakthroughs, we are still wrestling with the same basic questions that concerned Enlightenment philosophers (p. 71); **John Lanchester** considers what the correspondence between C.E.O.s and shareholders reveals about modern capitalism (p. 76); **Alex Ross** listens to the music of the Wandelweiser collective, an informal network of experimental-minded composers (p. 80); and new fiction by **Jonathan Lethem** (p. 58).

Podcasts: **David Remnick** and **Masha Lipman** discuss the 1991 coup in the Soviet Union; **Dorothy Wickenden** speaks with **John Cassidy** about new questions concerning the relationship between the State Department under Hillary Clinton and the Clinton Foundation; and, on the Fiction Podcast, **Annie Proulx** reads “A Losing Game,” by J. F. Powers, and discusses the story with **Deborah Treisman**.

Digital Extras: In honor of the U.S. Open, this week’s cover, by **Christoph Niemann**, comes to life as a 360° animation; photographs from a 2016 Hood By Air runway show and fitting; and poetry readings by **Billy Collins** and **Jane Hirshfield**.

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